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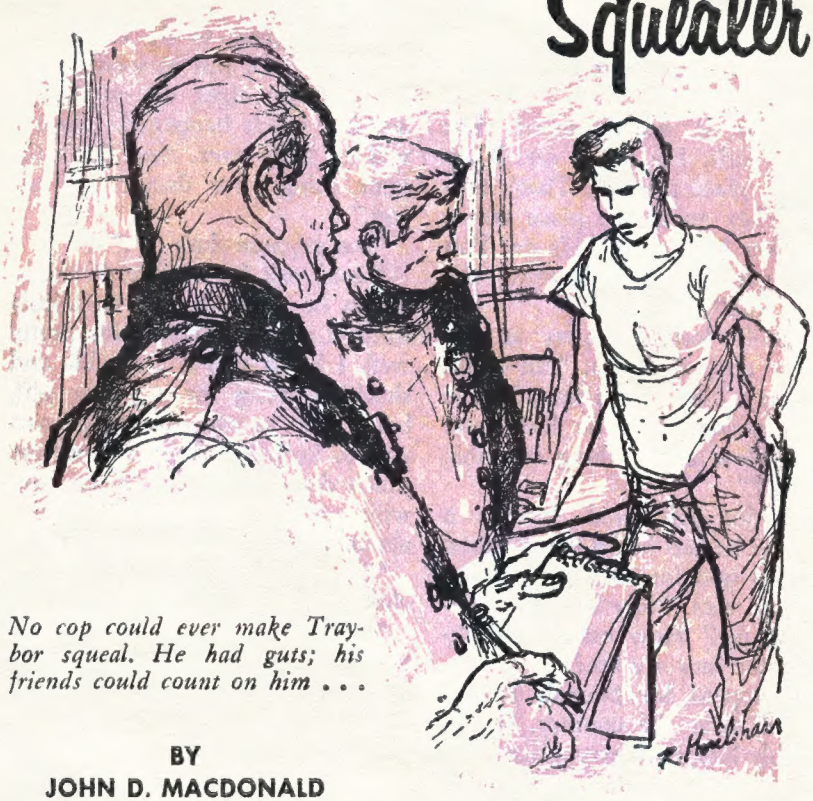
Squealer



No cop could ever make Traybor squeal. He had guts; his friends could count on him . . .

BY
JOHN D. MACDONALD

WHEN BROWDEN came off duty he stopped by the hospital on his way home to find out how the boy and the girl were doing. It was not out of his way. The girl's father was near the main desk, and Browden was trapped. They crossed the lobby and sat on a bench to talk. The father was named Nichols and he was an accountant. There was a sickness in his eyes.

"Sergeant, I don't understand how a thing like this can happen," he said. "They gave Betty Lee a sedative. She's asleep now. Her mother's with her."

"Do you know how the boy is?"

"I don't care how that damn Reilly boy is," Nichols said hotly.

"Maybe you should care. I saw his hands. He put up a good scrap. There were three of them. He did

what he could. They put him out by hitting him with a tire iron or something."

"He shouldn't have taken Betty Lee there."

"Maybe it wasn't smart. But they're kids. He has a car. They go to a place to park. That's normal. They go to the place where the other highschool kids go. You don't get anywhere blaming the Reilly kid."

Nichols looked down at his tensely clasped hands. "All right. I'm sorry. I heard he's okay. Maybe a concussion. And he lost some teeth. How can a thing like this happen?"

Browden felt tired. It was a question he had heard many times. It was a question that never failed to move him. How can this happen *to me?* How can this darkness come into *my* life?

"It happens, Mr. Nichols. It happens all over the country. It has probably happened everyplace since the beginning of time."

"Betty Lee's life is ruined."

"If you and your wife get all dramatic about it and go around wringing your hands for the next few years and telling her her life has been ruined, maybe it will be. You know the policy on this sort of thing. Her name won't be in the paper."

"Everybody will know. We ought to move away. I can get work some other place."

"I don't want to give you advice. That will just make it that much more important to your daughter. The best thing to do is get her back in school just as soon as you can and go right on as though nothing much happened. Then it will all blow over. And that's the same thing your doctor will tell you."

"But suppose she's . . ."

"Don't ask for trouble. If she is, it can be fixed. It can be legally fixed. Listen, I know kids pretty well. I know this is a terrible and shocking thing for a young girl, but it's up to you two as her parents to keep her from making too much drama out of it. Keep your wife under control. Be balanced about it."

"That's easy for you to say," Nichols said bitterly.

"And it'll be damn hard for you to do, I know. But people can do very hard things when it's for their kids."

After a long time Nichols said, softly, "Thanks, Sergeant. We'll try that, I guess. I guess that makes the most sense. But, what kind of animals could do that?"

"We've got a pretty good hunch it was highschool kids."

Nichols raised his head sharply, his voice going shrill. "Highschool kids! Not some kind of criminals?"

"Criminals, yes. Highschool kids, yes. There have been other incidents."

"But you mean boys that go to school with Betty Lee?"

"Maybe, Mr. Nichols, you've got a pretty glamorous idea of what highschool kids are. There are all kinds. There are over six thousand in that highschool. This is an industrial town. We get the kids of a lot of transient families. The law says they have to go to school. There's no law that says they have to be like the Boy Scout oath. The vast majority are good kids, but there are some rough monkeys in that place. We get knifings, and we get a little dope peddling and we get sex offenses. I'm a big husky guy, Mr. Nichols, and I know how to take care of myself, but believe me, there are some kids in that school I wouldn't want to meet in any dark alleys."

"Are you going to be able to find out who did this?"

"We've got a lead."

"What will happen to them when you catch them?"

"Depends on how old they are. If they're old enough, they get a man's punishment. Otherwise they go to juvenile court."

"They ought to be electrocuted."

Browden looked at Nichols without expression "I got to be running along. Try to handle it the way I said. Go explain it to your wife."

"I will, Sergeant. And . . . thanks."

After he reported for duty the next afternoon, Saturday afternoon, Browden checked with the hospital by phone, then drove there with Lieberman, his working partner on the detective squad. When they got to the hospital they found that, as Browden had suggested, the Reilly boy had been moved temporarily into a private room so that they could question him more readily. Reilly tried to smile at them. Browden liked the kid. He had a reddish brush cut, bright hot blue eyes.

"Have you seen Betty Lee? How is she?" He frowned. "I can't get used to talking without my front teeth."

"We haven't seen her yet, but she's coming along okay."

"Did you get them?"

"Not yet, but we're going to. It will help if you give us a run-through on what you did last night."

"It was the usual Friday night date, Sergeant. I picked Betty Lee up about seven, I guess it was. We went to the drive-in movie over on Ridge Boulevard. It was a double feature and we got out about ten thirty. From there we drove on out to Sandy's for hamburgers. Some of the other kids were there and we circulated around from car to car, you know. I have to get Betty Lee home by midnight on weekends. By ten o'clock when we date during the week. We left a little after eleven I think it was, and we drove around by Proctor Park." The boy blushed hotly. "We usually stop by there. You know. Park for a while and we have to leave by ten of midnight to get Betty Lee home under the wire. Jerry Tray-

bor and Ann Hawks followed along in Jerry's car and we parked near each other. They're not good friends. It just happened that way. When I get up out of here, I'm going to work Jerry over good."

"Why?"

"Here's the way it was. They were parked on our left, maybe twenty feet away. We both had the car lights out. We could hear Jerry's car radio. Mine is busted. I had my arm around Betty Lee. I didn't hear a thing and all of a sudden the door on my side is yanked open and somebody grabs me by the arm and pulls me right out onto the ground and kicks me. I yelled. I got up and started swinging. It was an awful dark night. I don't know who it was. I heard Betty Lee screaming on the other side of the car. I yelled to Jerry to help. I heard his motor start, heard him race it as he started to back out. Then something smashed me in the head and when I woke up I was in the ambulance going right through the middle of town. I think if Jerry had piled out and jumped in, we might have been all right. Except for my teeth. It was the first kick that did that."

"Were there any other cars there?"

"Not near us. Not near enough."

"You didn't recognize any of the three."

"I didn't even know there were three. How do you know that?"

"We got a report from a car that was parked about a hundred feet away. They heard the trouble. They saw the headlights on the Traybor kid's car sweep across yours as he turned. They saw three men, and saw you on the ground. One of the men was struggling with your girl. They were too far to see faces clearly. They drove away, too, and then they got worried and phoned the police from down the road."

"My father told me he brought my car in. He drove out with my sister and got it. They wouldn't let him see Betty Lee."

"She's pretty upset, Dick."

"Did they . . ."

"Yes."

Reilly's hand clenched and unclenched. "I figured so," he said quietly. "Damn them. Damn them!"

"She's going to need a lot of patience and . . . I guess the word is tenderness, Dick."

"I know, Sergeant. I keep thinking like it was my fault. I should have locked the car doors. But we've gone there a lot. You wouldn't think a thing like that would happen."

"I don't think it was your fault. I told her father that."

"Thanks."

They questioned him further, but he could provide no clue as to the identity of the attackers. They then talked to the girl in the presence of her mother. The girl, still drowsy with sedatives, could not

help them in any way. Browden talked with Mrs. Nichols in the hall. She turned out to be more cooperative than he had hoped. She agreed to visit Dick Reilly, and she understood that it would be healthy for the two young people to see each other as soon as it could be arranged.

From the hospital they drove to the residence of Jerry Traybor. His mother was alarmed that two police officers should be calling on Jerry. She was partially reassured when Browden told her that there were no charges against the boy. She said he was up in his room, and since he so seldom stayed in on a Saturday afternoon, she had wondered if he felt all right. She called him down to the living room, and she was reluctant about leaving the room when Browden said they wanted to talk to the boy alone.

Jerry Traybor was a tall, gangly boy in khakis and a T-shirt, a dark-haired boy with restless eyes and a high, unpleasant nasal tone of voice.

"Sure, we ran into them at Sandy's. Ann and me had spent most of the evening just cruising around like. When we figured they were headed for Proctor Park, we followed along. I don't know what for. What do you do anything for? We just went along, that was all, and we parked near them. I guess it was maybe sort of a gag because everybody knows those two like to be alone. They're real tense about each other."

"You heard the attack."

"We heard something. The car radio was on. There was yelling and screaming and I figured we ought to get out of there. I didn't want any trouble. I backed out."

"Did you hear him call to you for help?"

"I didn't hear anything like that. I figured it was a private fight. Anyway, why should he call me? I don't know him so good. I just see him around the school like."

"You felt you had no obligation?"

"Obligation? What do you mean by that? It was his fight. How did I know he didn't maybe start it?"

"You turned your headlights on, didn't you?"

"I guess I did. Yes."

"And when you backed out, turning the wheel as you did so, your headlights showed you what was going on, showed you the people involved."

"It was all kind of confused. I didn't see anything."

"Did you see two boys standing over Dick Reilly, and see another boy struggling with Betty Lee Nichols?"

"I didn't see anything like that."

"That's pretty strange, Jerry, because a couple in another car parked a hundred feet away saw all that, and they saw it in the light of your headlights. And you were a lot closer."

"I guess I wasn't looking. I guess

maybe it was like this. I was backing the car, see. And when you back up, you look out the back."

"You had no curiosity about what was going on?"

"I didn't say that. I said I just didn't see anything."

"Did you recognize any of the boys?"

There was no more shiftiness of the eyes. Jerry Traybor lifted his head and looked directly at Browden. His eyes were wide and bland. "No sir. I didn't recognize anybody. Like I said, I didn't see much of anything."

Traybor was a remarkably unskilled liar. Browden glanced at Lieberman and saw the disgust in his eyes.

"You're following the code, Jerry?" Lieberman asked gently.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You recognized one or more of the boys. You know them. But you're a big brave fellow. You won't answer a yell for help. But you've got too much courage to snitch to the cops. Isn't that it?"

"I didn't see anything. I keep telling you."

"You keep telling us and we keep not believing it. Maybe you don't want to tell because these are rough kids you saw. Maybe you tell us and they stick a knife between your ribs."

"I'm not scared of anybody," the boy said sullenly.

Browden said, "You know what happened to the girl, I guess."

"It was in the paper. It didn't give any names. But from where it happened and the time I guessed it was Dick and Betty Lee."

"That doesn't mean anything to you?" Lieberman asked.

"I'm sorry about it, sure. That was a tough thing to have happen. It certainly was."

"They could just as easily jumped your car, Jerry."

The boy swallowed. "I guess they could. It was Dick's bad luck they picked him."

"If they'd picked you, Dick would have helped you."

Jerry stared at them. "You don't know that. You can guess, but you don't know it. I figure he would have driven off too, like I did."

"Who did it, Jerry?" Browden asked.

"I tell you and I tell you I don't know. I didn't see anything."

Lieberman said gently, "You live in the world, Jerry. You can't shut your eyes all the time. What happens to your friends is your business, and it's ours. You have an obligation."

"I don't see as I got an obligation. I never got close to Reilly. He takes himself serious. He's a wheel. Student council and all that stuff. And he's got a stuck-up girl. What business is it of mine?"

"Then you did recognize the boys?"

"You're trying to mix me up. I didn't say that."

"First you said it was a private

fight and that's why you didn't jump in. Now you say it was because you didn't know them well enough. You imply that you knew what was happening."

"It could have been a private fight. How do I know? We didn't see anything, either of us."

Browden glanced at Lieberman and said, "Come on, Mose."

As they walked down the walk to their car they heard Jerry call after them, "I'd be glad to help if I could. You know that."

They didn't turn or answer. As they drove away Lieberman said, "Worth a dozen of that one."

"The Reilly kid?"

"Who else? A code they've got. Fine. Don't tell the cops the right time. Comic book ethics. Maybe the girl will be easier."

"I have my doubts. She'll have had her instructions from Traybor."

Ann Hawks, daughter of a construction worker, lived in a large maroon trailer in a park on the south edge of town. She was alone in the trailer. She wore blue jean shorts and a tight yellow sweat shirt. Her blonde hair was tied back in a skimpy pony tail.

"Gee, I can't tell you any more than Jerry did. Like I guess he told you, we just didn't see anything. It was . . . you know . . . all confusing."

"You're a little bit better liar than he is, but not much, Ann."

"How come you think you can come in here and talk to me like that?"

"Don't get lippy, Ann," Lieberman said in his customary gentle tone. "We won't talk about what you saw or who you recognized or anything like that. Let's talk about your father for a minute."

"So what about him? I don't get it."

Lieberman, sitting on a couch in the cramped, cluttered trailer, leaned forward, his face intent. "Honey, suppose somebody was getting beat up and they yelled to your father for help. What would happen?"

"He'd jump right in, swinging."

"I guess your father is a man, isn't he?"

"Sure he's a man."

"But, honey, you go out with a punk who runs like a rabbit. It doesn't figure."

"I tried to get him to help out."

"But he didn't want to get mixed up in anything."

"That was it, I guess."

"Six thousand kids in that school. Three thousand boys. Out of three thousand you pick yourself a real tiger."

"Jerry's all right," she said sullenly.

"Too scared to help out and now he's too scared to tell us who did it."

"He can't tell you who did it. Gosh, you don't know the score. They'd maybe kill him."

"Honey, I want you to think real hard about something else. Just

what would Jerry have done if they'd picked your car?"

"He'd fight."

Lieberman smiled. "Would he? You think he would? Or maybe beg for mercy? Or maybe run down the road and all the way home and hide under the bed?"

"He isn't a bad kid."

"Not bad, honey. Just weak as water."

Browden sensed it was his turn to come in again. "Mose, I think if we take them both down and put them in separate cells, we can get an answer in a day or two."

He sensed at once that it was a bad estimate. The girl's gray eyes seemed to darken. "Go ahead. You do that. Have fun. You could keep us in there forever and you won't get a damn thing."

Lieberman gave Browden a quick glance of regret. When they were back in the car Lieberman said, "I was getting close, Ed."

"I know. I sensed it. I tried to push, but I pushed too hard and spoiled it. I'm sorry."

"Okay with you if I try her alone tomorrow?"

"It's okay with me."

"There's more there than with the Traybor kid. Same bad sense of values, but more underneath. More decency. She's the one to work on."

On Monday afternoon Lieberman reported failure. "I think I got close, but not close enough. She understands what the word obligation means. But she feels it's to the Traybor kid first. She recognized those kids, same as Traybor. But . . ." He shrugged. "They got a date tonight, Ed. You want to play a little game?"

"I've heard that before, Mose. Do we, as officers of the law, exceed our authority?"

"What else?"

"I got to get me a new partner, or I'll never end up with a pension."

"Think of how I keep your life bright and exciting."

They used Lieberman's own car, a dark, elderly, asthmatic sedan. They used the patience that had been trained into them. Browden, as the better driver, waited behind the wheel. At midnight they picked up Jerry Traybor's distinctive chopped-down Ford as it turned out of Sandy's and headed toward town. Browden followed without lights. If it showed signs of turning into a chase, he was going to break it off. They had agreed on that.

"Traffic is okay, Ed, and this looks like a good place," Lieberman said, betraying his excitement by his casualness of tone.

Browden accelerated and passed the Ford. When his back wheel was even with the Ford's front wheel, he bore gradually right. There was one small thump and clash of metal. Both cars dipped down through the wide shallow ditch and the Ford stopped with its nose against a barbed wire fence.

They swung out of the sedan in-

to the night shadows. Traybor had vaulted out of the open Ford. He ran down the road, shoes slapping the asphalt, a thin, frantic, receding figure in the faint starlight.

The girl had gotten out of the car and she was backing slowly away, ready to panic, aware she had no chance against the two figures.

"Relax, honey," Lieberman said, stopping. "It's me again." Browden stopped too.

Her voice was tremulous in the darkness. "The cop?"

"That's right. Don't be afraid."

"I . . . I don't understand."

Browden got in the back. Ann Hawks sat up front with Lieberman. He said, putting the old sedan into gear, "Honey, it could have been your friends, you know. Those ones you won't identify."

"He . . . he ran." She began to cry. Lieberman dug kleenex out of the glove compartment.

"Like a big rabbit," Lieberman said.

"This time it could have been you instead of Betty Lee Nichols."

"I . . . I know. I thought it was going to be."

They waited in silence.

"Ricky Wyostek," she said. "He was standing by Dick. Junky Turner was holding Betty Lee. I think his real name is Ronald. I don't know who the other one was, but it was probably Skip French. Those three run around together. Skip carries a switch blade."

"I know French and Turner," Browden said. "They got off on a stolen car rap over a year ago. They must be nineteen. They still in highschool?"

"Not any more. Ricky Wyostek is real old. He's over twenty."

"I think I am a sadistic cop," Lieberman said softly, "and I think I am going to dearly enjoy picking up those little playmates. Let's go get 'em, Ed."

They took the girl home and then they went and got them.

Pied Pipers

Philip O'Brien and Thomas Cagney, New York detectives, raided a card game, nabbing 17 men. No telephone, however, was available for calling for reinforcements. The officers decided one of them could not watch the prisoners alone while the other went for help.

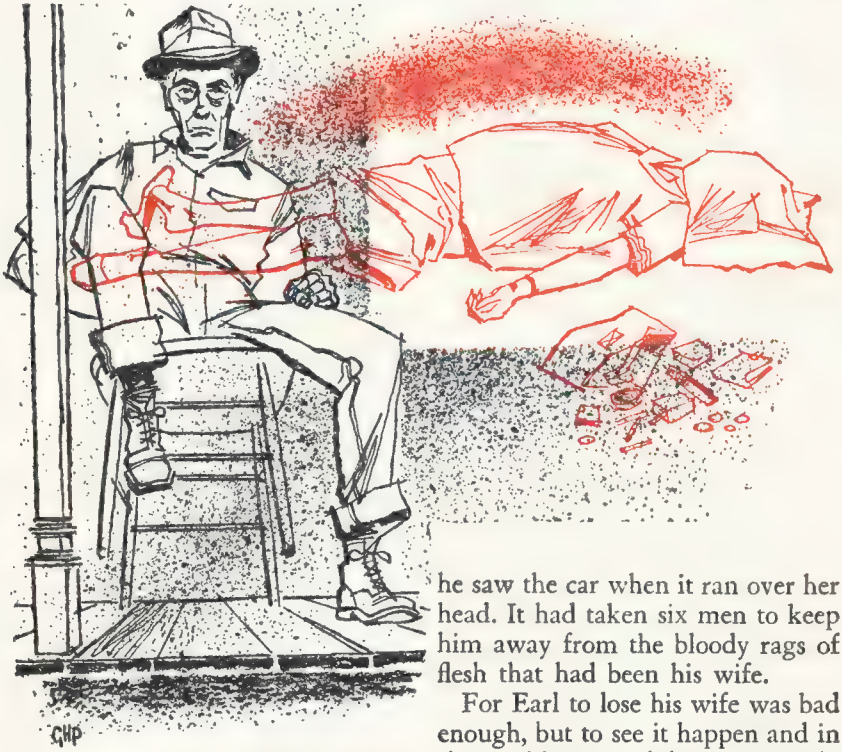
They solved their problem. After forcing the men to hand over their wallets, O'Brien said: If you want your wallets back, come to the station." The officers walked out, and the 17 men followed them several blocks to the nearest station house.

The Man Who Never Smiled

BY ROBERT S. SWENSON

THE ACCIDENT happened on the 29th of September and it's a fact that from that day until the Fourth of July of the following years, Earl Crowthers had never smiled.

Earl saw the whole thing. He saw the accident that day on the 29th of September. He saw his wife when she got hit by the car, and he saw the car when it ran over her head. It had taken six men to keep him away from the bloody rags of flesh that had been his wife.



The couple had to get to Knoxville fast. Just their luck Earl was sitting there, ready to help them.

For Earl to lose his wife was bad enough, but to see it happen and in the terrible way it did was too much. It was easy to see that when Janie died the biggest part of Earl died too.

On the day of the accident, it was just two o'clock in the afternoon when Earl and Janie drove into town. It was a small farmer's town about fifty miles east of Knoxville.

When they came in, the town was about filled up because it was Saturday, and they were lucky to find a parking space just a short way beyond the hardware store. Earl pulled up his pick-up truck and stopped it, and then he jumped out and came around to help his wife out of the truck. She was pregnant, due in about a week, and she carried big. It would be her first and she was seventeen. Earl was twenty-six.

When they got out of the truck, they began walking back toward the hardware store, at a slow pace on account of Janie, and by the way Earl held Janie's arm it was plain to see there wasn't a prouder man in the whole county.

When they got up to the front of the hardware store they stopped walking and Janie looked up at her husband. She was a little girl and Earl stood a good foot higher than she did. "You go on in," she said. "You go on in and talk to Sam. I'm going across the street to the five and ten."

When she saw the look of concern on Earl's face, she smiled at him. "Well, go on," she said. "You don't have to come with me. I'll be all right. You just go on in."

She took a step away from him and he released her arm. "I'll be over in a few minutes," Earl told her. "I won't be long."

The road leading into that end of town came in on a long rising curve. The curve ended at the top of a small hill, and from there the road sloped down on a slight grade straight through the town. The business part of town began at the top of the hill, and the hardware store was about one hundred feet down from it.

It was just as Janie stepped out onto the street that a black, convertible Cadillac came shooting over the top of the hill. There was only a short screech of tires before the car hit her.

Like a piece of blown paper she was knocked high into the air ahead of the car. And then her battered, broken body fell back again onto the pavement, and she bounced and tumbled along the street until her motion died, and then she just lay there like a torn rag doll.

In a second the car was on her again still screeching its tires. The wheel caught her under the armpit and skidded across her shoulder. It ran over her face and it squashed her head like it was a ripe melon.

The car stopped about fifty yards beyond her, and the man raised himself out of his seat and looked back. He was a slight man, about forty-five, with gray wavy hair and a gray mustache. He took one look at the girl, and then he dropped down onto the seat again. There

was another screech of tires and in a few moments the car was out of sight. The man was never found.

After the accident Earl's sister took Earl to live with her. For the first few months he never even left the house and the words he spoke could have been counted on the fingers of his hand.

By springtime he had improved some. It got so he would go to town occasionally and sit in the chair in front of the hardware store, and after a while he began helping his brother-in-law in the fields. Sometimes he could hoe ten, even twelve hours straight almost without stopping, and sometimes he wouldn't work five minutes but he was on his way back to the house again. And sometimes he would stop in his work and just lean on his hoe and look out to the hills for fifteen, twenty minutes or even a half hour without ever moving until his brother-in-law came over and touched him or spoke to him.

He could go for days without saying a word and he could sit in a chair for hours like he was a part of it. He had lost over thirty pounds since the accident, but in the spring he began to pick up a little. He talked more. He was getting better. But he never smiled.

There were some who said he was right out of his mind and ought to be taken to a doctor, but Sam Boyden down at the hardware said it wasn't so much that he was out of his mind as it was he was in it, deep down somewhere, still living way back there at the time of the accident. He'd probably be already recovered if he hadn't seen her killed, Sam said. Just be good to him, he said, and be friendly, and he'll come out of it himself after a while.

On the Fourth of July Earl was still in himself. He was sitting in front of the hardware store almost the only person in town because of the celebration the town was having up at the school grounds. He was sitting there like he did sometimes, just staring across the street and not ever moving, when the car came over the hill.

It was a foreign car, a very expensive convertible, heavy, and with a long, low look to it. There was a man and a woman in the car, and the car pulled up to a stop in front of the hardware store. It stood directly opposite where Earl was sitting.

The driver was a tall man, about forty or so. He wore an expensive white sport shirt and he had on a long-billed, khaki cap with a flick-down, polaroid sun shield.

Earl was sitting at an angle to the street so that he was looking across the street a few feet in front of where the car had stopped, and when he didn't look over at the man, the man leaned a little out of the car and yelled at him.

"Hey!"

Earl still didn't look at him so

the man tooted his horn a couple of times and yelled again.

"Hey!"

"Oh, *Jesus,* Harry," the woman said. "Get out of the car and go up and speak to him. And it might help if you tried acting a little pleasant for a change."

She had a broad, tanned face with the kind of full red lips that catch the eye. She wore sun glasses and she had on a thin summer dress that was cut low and appealing at the neck. Her long, black hair was pulled back smooth against her head and it was tied in back with a ribbon.

The man pushed the door open and at the same time he leaned over and spoke to the woman. "These goddam hill-billies think they own the world. They're too damned independent." He got out of the car and walked over to Earl and stood at his left elbow. Earl still didn't look at him. He seemed unaware that the man was even there.

"I had a little trouble back on the road," the man said. "I could use your help."

Without lifting his eyes, Earl moved his head around until he was looking at the man's slight paunch, and then he lifted his gaze until he was looking the man square in the face.

"I said I had a little trouble back on the road," the man said again a little louder. "I ran into a dog and fender got knocked in so much that it scrapes against the tire when I try to turn the wheel."

"A dog?" Earl said.

"Yes. A goddam dog came running out at us about a mile back. He damned near killed my wife and me both. I should have run right into him, but you know how it is. Reflex action. I jerked the wheel over when I saw him and we went off the road. Plowed up about fifty yards of bush. We clipped the dog on the fender, though, and that's how the fender got pushed into the wheel. I tried to pull it out myself but I couldn't do it. It's like cast iron. Those goddam fools still think they're making battleships over there."

He waited for Earl to say something but Earl didn't. He just looked at the man without saying anything.

The man looked back at his wife and shrugged his shoulders. Then he took a big roll of bills out of his pocket and peeled off a ten. About like a housewife peels a leaf off a head of cabbage. He held the bill out to Earl. "I think if we both get on it we can pull it out," he said.

While he was waiting for Earl to take the money, the car door banged and in a moment the woman came up and stood beside her husband. "We'd appreciate it if you'd help us," she said. "We have to be in Knoxville by four o'clock."

"You say you hit a dog?" Earl said to the woman.

"Yes, that's right," she said. "I

suppose we should report it, but there doesn't seem to be anybody around. Even the service station was closed."

Earl pulled himself out of the chair and stood up, and the man and woman moved over to one side a little to get out of his way. But Earl didn't move. He just stood there in front of the chair looking at the car. "Fourth of July," he said after a minute. "Everybody's up at the school."

The man held the ten dollars out to Earl again. "I think if we both pulled on the damn thing we could get it out all right." But Earl didn't even look at the money. He just stood there looking at the car and blinking his eyes every now and then. After a while he went over and squatted down beside the dented fender. The man came over and stood beside him.

They stayed that way for about three minutes without saying anything, Earl squatting by the crumpled fender and the man standing beside him. Finally it became more than the man could bear. He looked back at his wife and shook his head, and then he grabbed the fender with his two hands. "Goddam it, I've got to be in Knoxville by four o'clock," he said. "Let's just pull on the damn thing and see if we can straighten it out."

But Earl didn't answer him. He just ran his fingers over his chin a few times and he kept studying the fender and the wheel. Then he looked up at the man.

"It ain't the fender that's bothering," he said.

The man looked down at him, slightly amazed. "Well, goddam it, man, don't tell *me* what it is. I can see. The goddam fender is pushed into the tire and I can't turn the wheel."

"When you went off the road back there you got some brush hooked up under the wheel. That's what's bothering," Earl said. "The fender ain't hardly touching the wheel at all."

"Well, goddam it, of course it isn't. Not now. It's only when I turn the wheel."

"If you yank the bush out of there if that's what it is, you'll be all right," Earl said. "I'd do it for you only I got my back threw out a week ago and I can't do much twisting and bending. I'll get in the car and back it up. It might loosen it up enough so you can get at it whatever it is. You squat down and look under the front of the car when I back it up. You ought to be able to see it then."

The man turned back to his wife with his arms stretched out in a gesture of helplessness. "What in the *hell* is he talking about," he said. "It's the goddam fender that's—"

"Jesus Christ, Harry," she said. She put her hands on her hips and took a step toward him. "Do what he says! You don't know anything

about cars. Maybe he's right. How do you know? Just do what he says. We'll never get to Knoxville if you keep this up."

He saw the anger in her eyes and, deep down, almost hidden, the hatred. The man let out a deep sigh and dropped his arms so that his hands slapped against his thighs. When he turned around, Earl was just getting into the car.

The man watched Earl as he got behind the wheel. Earl slammed the door, looked down and found the clutch, and then cautiously he put the car into gear.

The man gritted his teeth and blew a blast of air out of his nose. He came over and yanked open the car door. "You've got it in low," he said.

"Leave it there," the woman said. "He's a no-good son of a . . ."

Earl shoved the shift into reverse.

The man went out in front of the car, took one baleful glance at his wife, and he got down on his knees on the road and looked under the car. "All right," he said. "Back it up."

Earl gunned the motor a few times and then the car jerked back a few feet and stopped. The man hopped back onto his feet. "I told you," he said. "There's nothing under there. Any damn fool can see what it is. It's the fender that's doing it."

Earl leaned out of the car. "You didn't hardly look at it right," he said. "There must be a bush hooked way up there under the wheel. You've got to get your head way down close to the street in line with the wheel. That's the only way you'll see to get it out if it's there."

The man turned to his wife again. "Of all the goddam foolish nonsense. If he thinks I'm going to fall on my face again to look for a bush that isn't there, he's crazy. Any damn fool could see it. All we have to do is pull the fender out."

She came right up to him this time with her fists clenched. Earl thought, she's going to strike him. She didn't. "Harry, please, please in the name of God, just do what he says and get it over with. Why do you have to argue *all* the time? Just look and see. Is that such a difficult thing to do? Is that asking too much? *Just look and see!* If it's there it's there, and if it isn't it isn't. We won't get to Knoxville until four o'clock tomorrow morning if you keep this up."

He sucked in his breath and held it for a few seconds while he glared at his wife. Then he blew himself out. "All right, all right," he said.

He started to get down in front of the car again, but then he changed his mind. Instead he came over to Earl and looked into the car. Immediately he exploded. *"Jesus Christ!* God*dam* it, man. You've got it in *low* again. What in hell you trying to do? *Kill me?"*

He turned to his wife. "He can't drive. You get in there."

He yanked open the door and Earl got out of the car.

"Well, goddam it, woman! Don't just stand there looking at me like that. Get in. We haven't got all day."

"It don't hardly matter," Earl said. "About the bush, I mean. It—"

The man turned on him. "It doesn't matter! Well, goddam it, I'll tell you it matters. We've gone this far with it and by God we'll see it through. I'll prove to you—and her too—once and for all that I'm right about this. I'll prove—"

"Harry! Shut up! the woman said. "Can't you ever—"

But he never let her finish. He turned on her in a fury and grabbing her by the arm, he pushed her into the car. Get in there and back this goddam car up."

He went over and dropped down in front of the car. "Well, goddam it!" he shouted. "Do something!"

She did nothing for exactly one second. And then very deliberately she pushed the shift into low gear.

En Cop

In Nagoya, Japan, Umeichi Fujita, a 41 year old policeman, is looking for another job. He was arrested recently by fellow officers for purse-snatching at a race track. "I needed the money for carfare to get back to my beat," he explained after his arrest.

Theft from Thief

In Palm Springs, Calif. Peter Klassen, 19, pleaded guilty of petit larceny. While in the police station he noticed hubcaps that he thought looked familiar. A check disclosed that they had been stolen from Klassen's car while he was busy looting other autos.

Piece Work

Eldon Smith, of Springfield, Ill. received a one to two year sentence after he pleaded guilty to larceny of a motor car—piece by piece. Police said he took his nephew's car to Terre Haute, Ind. where he proceeded to drink away his means of transportation. First he sold the car radio. Then, drink by drink, he sold the battery, the four tires and finally the radiator.

Preacher's Tale

"At my place," she said softly. "He should have known better than try to out-think his teacher."

BY MAX KANE

THE CLICKING sound of her high heels against the concrete surface echoed sharply off the high, brick walls that formed the city canyon.

Seconds after she had turned into the alley, Janet Thatcher realized she was foolish for taking this short route to her flat. Any twenty-three-year-old girl in her right mind never would go through an alley in this section of the city. But here she was, a teacher—or preacher as she had heard some of the boys term the instructors—walking right through the black depth as though

it was the most popular street in the world.

She shuddered against the thick, chill darkness and hunched deeper into her belted coat, quickened her nervous steps toward the light from the street lamp that filled the exit some forty yards ahead.

The scuff of a shoe behind her was her first warning.

She stiffened with taut awareness and whirled around. But she was too late to ward off the hard-charging bulk that drove into her. A small girl, only ninety-eight pounds, she was catapulted sideways against one of the brick walls. A scream died in her throat as the fist, coming out of nowhere, smashed against her lips, staggering her. She slid down the wall, rolled over on her hands and knees. Sheer surprise and the stunning effect of the blow left her momentarily defenseless.

An arm lashed about her neck, jerking her up on her feet. A hand ripped open her coat, and she heard the sharp tear of cloth as the front of her blouse split to her waist. Fingers fastened on her bra; one vicious yank exposed her small breasts. Lips touched her ear.

"Any noise, Preacher, and you're dead," the boy's panting voice hissed.

She stood paralyzed by terror. Then black and insane anger piled up inside her, replacing the terror. She drove one elbow back hard. The boy grunted and came off her back. She whirled around and saw his face in the light from the street lamp behind her. She recognized him immediately.

He was a short boy with wide shoulders and a heavy face. She saw him frequently at school. And she was always aware of the way he watched her, the way his eyes crawled over her, stripping all of her clothes from her body. His name was Tokey; at sixteen he was war counselor of the Zeets, a gang of wild, mean boys who never gave up trying to dominate the entire school.

Now he took a step toward her, a grin twisting his face. She drove one knee up into his body. He doubled forward with a pain-filled curse, and then he was on her again, his powerful arms locking her against his body.

They struggled savagely with no holds barred. Anything went. Janet fought with silent, cold fury as his one hand held her throat so she couldn't scream. Fingers, pressing like steel clamps, choked off her breath. She retreated until she felt the garbage can against the back of her thighs. The boy hit her again in the face, bent her back and over the can. Her senses began to rock and blur. She sagged. The boy pushed her up on the can. Her head and shoulders were pressed against the brick wall. Her resistance was gone.

She lay limp, letting him have his brutal way with her . . .

It was over much sooner than she expected. Breath ran in and out of her in shuddering gulps. She tasted the salty hotness of her own blood. His weight went off of her, leaving her weak and sweating.

And then the harsh words: "Thanks, Preacher."

For a long time everything kept going away from her, coming back, going away again. Then gradually the sick fog drifted from her eyes and she realized she was standing and that another figure was standing in front of her. His face, illuminated in the light from the street lamp, told her something was wrong. This was a different boy, not the one who had attacked her. But she recognized him too. His name was Bismarck. Like Tokey, he was sixteen, a tall, thick-chested youth; he had long sideburns and his eyes were black and vacant like the shaft of an abandoned coal mine. He was president of the Zeets.

Slowly, Janet pushed her skirt down over her white thighs and folded the coat over her bruised breasts. She used the can to help her remain upright, shoulders braced against the wall, feet widespread, her legs shaking with weakness. She was thoroughly used up, yet a seething fury raged inside her.

The boy laughed harshly. "Who does this to you, Preach?"

She met his eyes and held them, but she didn't answer him immediately.

"Come on, Preach. Somebody'll feed it to me. You might as well give it first-hand."

"Tokey," she said, speaking past puffed lips, her voice cracking over the single utterance.

"The hell!" Bismarck's face clouded. He shook his head. "I don't like that, Preach. I'm head man. It ain't good when one of my guys goes off half-cocked. You know what I mean?"

She knew what he meant, but she didn't say anything. She watched him worry. It became strangely quiet in the alley, and in the quietness the idea began to form in her mind. She mulled it over, gaining confidence every second. She regained enough strength to stand without support of the wall, and she had it planned.

She said, "Maybe you're no longer head man."

"What do ya mean by a crack like that?"

"The real Bismarck once said, 'The king reigns, but does not govern.' Maybe it's like that with you."

"Don't get cute, Preach."

She shrugged her shoulders with false indifference. "It really doesn't mean a thing to me, Bismarck."

He stared down at her for a moment. Then, "Okay, so one of my guys is gettin to be Mr. Big. So I gotta bust his head. I do it later. Right now, I got somethin else . . ."

He took a step toward her. She felt his hand on her waist. She grabbed his wrist. "Not here. It

won't be any good here," she said softly.

"Huh?"

"Please?"

His face tightened. "You're a crazy preacher. Real crazy."

"Maybe . . . At my place," she said quickly, softly. "I know how."

He looked at her. "You got a lotta things in that red head of yours, ain'tcha Preach? Yeah, a lotta things. Okay, feed it to me."

She kept her voice low, watching his face as she talked. She picked her words carefully. She didn't let him interrupt. When she had finished, Bismarck gripped her shoulders with his hands. It was obvious she had jolted him as he hadn't been for a long time.

"Preacher," he said hotly, "you want Tokey *dead?"*

"Dead!"

"Preach, Preach," he said softly, shaking his head. "I just don't understand you."

"Do you have to?"

He stared down at her, and then he dropped his hands from her shoulders. "Let's move."

They walked out of the alley together. At the exit, they stopped while she told him how to get to her flat. Then they walked away from each other.

Five minutes later, Janet was in her flat. She took off her coat and fastened the front of her blouse together with the one remaining button. Then she fixed her puffed mouth with lipstick, applying a generous amount. When she was satisfied, she sat down on the couch and lit a cigarette. She smoked slowly. Waiting for Bismarck and thinking about what was going to happen, she was quite calm. Surprisingly, she felt no fear, only a small shiver of mounting excitement. This was going to be sweet...

Bismarck knocked on her door shortly after nine o'clock.

"Did you get it?" she asked as she closed the door behind him.

He grinned at her and took the length of bike chain out of his pocket.

Gripping the chain, she smiled thinly. "Where is he?"

Bismarck gave her a number. She picked up the telephone. A few moments later, Tokey, at the other end of the line, laughed. "Sure, Preacher, sure. How do I get there?"

She told him.

Turning away from the telephone, she dropped the bike chain on the couch. "All right, Bismarck, give me your things."

The boy took the knuckles and the flick knife out of his pocket and handed them to her. "Clean," he said.

"That's the way you must be when the police get here."

She put the knuckles and the knife in a desk drawer and pulled a .38 out of the drawer. Facing him, there was a wry smile on her face. "A friend of mine—a detective on the bunko squad—gave me this

when I came to this neighborhood to teach. I wonder why?"

Bismarck gave her a tight smile and took the gun. "I wouldn't know."

She was standing in front of him. "You ready?"

"Bang away."

She began with his clothes, tearing his shirt with her long fingers. Then she went to work on his face, punching him viciously, slamming her clenched hands against his lips, his nose, his eyes. He didn't move. She began to laugh softly. Each blow gave her a sense of exaltation. She raked his face, feeling his skin pile up under her nails. He reached up with his hands then and grabbed her wrists.

"That's enough."

She stood in front of him, breath running in and out of her in ragged gasps, as he tested his face with his fingers. Blood ran from his nose and mouth and a puff was beginning to form under his left eye. Abruptly, he grinned at her.

"Good job, Preach. That Tokey sure gave me a belting. What else could I do but—"

"What else?" she agreed, and smiled; she kissed him, lightly.

He walked over to a front window and stood there looking down at the street. Janet sat down on the couch. Almost ten minutes passed before he turned away from the window, the .38 in his right hand. He walked over to the couch and stood towering over her.

"Tokey's on his way up."

"Is he?" She stood up. "Kiss me."

"Huh?"

She saw his eyes narrow with surprise and pleasure.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she asked softly.

"Sure, sure. Only . . ."

"It wasn't in the plan. Is that it?"

"Not till after. Then . . ." His dark eyes danced with fire. He grinned. Blood spurted from the crack in his upper lip. He took her in his arms. "Preach, you're the craziest . . ."

She kissed him hard, twisting her mouth slightly and her body into him.

She stepped away from him. "Jes-us—" he muttered.

"Soon," she promised. "Soon . . . Now, get into the kitchen."

She picked up the length of bike chain and walked over to the bedroom door. Swinging the door half shut, she ripped the one button off her blouse. The blouse hung open. She turned and faced the front room. She was partially hidden behind the door; she held the length of chain in one hand. Across the room, Bismarck was standing in the kitchen doorway.

The poor sucker, she thought.

He faded into the darkness behind him as the knock sounded on the front door.

"Turn the knob," she said.

Tokey stepped into the flat, closed the door, and leaned his

shoulders against the wall beside the door. He didn't move. He glanced swiftly around the room, and then gave his entire attention to her. A crooked grin twisted his mouth, and he pushed away from the wall.

"Hi ya, Preacher."

He clicked the lock on the door and moved across the room toward her.

She let him get almost to her before she stepped forward and swung the chain in a wide arc. The chain slashed across his neck. His pain-filled curse filled the room, and then he was crouched before her, lamp light gleaming off the blade of the flick knife in his hand.

He didn't have a chance.

Bismarck was there in the room, behind Tokey now; he said softly, "Hey, Tokey—"

Tokey whirled around.

Bismarck raised the .38 and shot his friend in the face.

Screaming shrilly, Janet moved backwards into the bedroom, thrust the length of chain under the bed mattress. Still screaming, she returned to the front room. Bismarck had dropped the .38. It was on the floor near Tokey's crumpled body.

Suddenly, there was a lot of noise in the hall outside the flat. Knuckles beat heavily on the door. Janet quit screaming then. The door burst open and the uniformed policeman charged into the front room, gun in hand. Faces crowded the doorway behind him.

Bismarck quietly told the story Janet had planted in his mind. "This chick's mine," he said, waving his hand toward her. "I come up here a minute ago and find him" —he pointed to Tokey's body on the floor—"rapin' her. Me and him get in a rumble. He gets out a flick. He'll kill me, and her. The chick gives me the rod. It's hers—she's got a permit. *Pop*. And he's down on the floor. It's self-defense. You know?"

The policeman sighed deeply. "Okay kid, but—"

"No!" Janet whispered hoarsely. She found her voice. "They came here together, the two of them together." She pointed to Bismarck. "He—he raped me and then they began fighting. I got my gun and this boy took it away from me and shot the other one in the face. Oh my God, it was horrible . . ."

She heard Bismarck snarl. Suddenly, the policeman was grappling with him. He got one of Bismarck's arms twisted up behind his back. The boy was in a half crouch, staring at her, his eyes wide with fear, his muscles bunched with rage.

"Bitch!" he said in a half whisper.

The policeman jerked his arm.

Janet sobbed. "I need a doctor! Oh God, I need a doctor! Please, somebody get me a doctor!"

She fell on the couch and she heard the policeman tell somebody to call an ambulance. She sobbed hard, beating the couch with her

clenched fists. The sobs were real, but inside she was laughing, too.

Horrible, dirty boys, pushing her around in school and on the streets. Who did they think they were, the little mutts!

She raised her head and stared at Bismarck. His shirt was torn, his face was puffed and freshly scratched; the red smear on his mouth should be a clincher.

Who would the police believe? A nice little preacher who had been raped or the head of the Zeets?

Costly Pickup

Chester Hamilton, 25, of Detroit, was fined $15 for picking up something on the street. Officers testified that he stole a man hole cover.

Mystery Car

Chicago police found a car parked on the north side with over 300 bullet holes in the body. They checked license plates and located the owner, Herbert Schmidt, 22. Schmidt explained that he had put the bullet holes in the car himself last year when he returned from a hunting trip, empty-handed.

Steady Work

In London, England, Norman White, 29, was being persecuted. Four times in three weeks he was fired a few hours after he got a job. A man identifying himself as a policeman would call White's new employers and warn them that White was a homicidal maniac. But each time he was fired White collected a week's pay.

White now has a steady job for at least eight months—in jail, sewing mail bags. Charged in court with obtaining money under false pretenses, he admitted that he got himself fired each time by posing as a policeman during the telephone calls.

Home Work

A thief who broke into the study of the Rev. Robert N. DuBose at Columbia, S. C. stole several silver dollars and a sermon titled "Good Sportsmanship."

Kill Fever

Sam Pippet didn't like the big-joke. The man should never have called him Pee-pot.

BY REY ISELY

HE WAS everything I hated, and had everything I wanted. One of those big laughing guys with a monopoly on easy street. He was a lazy pig, but always in the bucks; one of those mugs who comes up with ideas and lets the other guy do the work. Spent most of his time reading a joke book so he'd have some ready for the next party. That's what I hated. He was always the big life, always trying to steal the show with those lousy jokes of his.

Like the time I first met him.

We were both invited to the same party. I came in a little late and was getting introduced around.

"Mr. Malone," somebody said, "I'd like you to meet Sam Pippet."

Malone slapped me on the back and took

hold of my hand with one of those big-time hand shakes. "Haw haw," he said, and I could see a funny look on his face like he always does when he figures he's going to pull a good one. "It's a pleasure," he said, "to meet you, Mr. *Pee-Pot!*"

Pee Pot!

Somebody laughed.

That did it. Not since I was a kid had anybody been dumb enough to pull that one. *Pee Pot! Pee Pot! Here comes the Pee Pot!* No guy ever tried that twice.

I jerked my hand out of his and brought my left up from the hip with everything I had. Somehow it missed. Before I could quite get my balance he had my arm, and next thing I knew I was flat on my back on the floor. No guy had ever done that before. I looked up and there he was staring down at me with that funny look on his face.

"You shouldn't have tried that, Mr. Pee Pot!" he said.

But nobody laughed this time. The room was dead quiet. Too many people there knew Sam Pippet.

My hand was inside my coat and on my gun before I knew I had reached for it.

Then I saw the brunette.

Everything works in slow motion at a time like that. She was standing off to the side, an excitement in her eyes; like she knew what was going to happen and was for me.

In a part of a second I changed my mind. Because of her. Like I say, everything's slow motion. Despite the heat I felt against Malone, I knew I could have that woman. A guy can tell a thing like that. I could tell it right then. She was beautiful.

Shooting Vic Malone would be sucker stuff. And I'm no sucker. I can balance the odds and bide my time 'till the heavy-ends my way. What had thrown me for the moment was that lousy name he'd called me and the fact he'd laid me on my back. I wasn't used to that sort of thing. Seeing the brunette and wanting her straightened out my thinking.

But if she figured I was going to put on a big show for her, she was mistaken. This Malone was a scienced fighter. That was some sort of judo trick he'd used on me, and I wasn't going to give him a reason to show it off again. I got up and forced myself to smile. My time would come, later.

"I'm sorry, Malone," I said. "I guess I blew my stack there for a second. It was that name—carried some bad memories."

Malone was surprised. He had been standing, ready, like maybe he'd heard of Sam Pippet and knew Sam Pippet wasn't the guy to take a beating lying down. But when he saw me smile he relaxed; when Sam Pippet smiles they don't stay mad long. He held out his hand and I shook it.

He said, "My joke was in poor taste, Sam. I'm sorry."

"That's okay." Over his shoulder she was watching me. I raised my voice loud enough so she could hear, said, "I'm glad I didn't hit you, Malone. I don't know my own strength when I blow up."

Malone grinned. "I'm glad you didn't, too," he said. "Let's find a couple of drinks."

"Sure," I said.

Malone and I had a couple of drinks together.

Everybody tried not to pay too much attention to us. But you could tell they were surprised. I could imagine what they were saying. "Sam just got up and smiled at him. Now he's drinking with him. I can't understand it." And somebody else would say, "I can't believe it. Sam Pippet!" Then somebody else would tell them, "Hell, Sam didn't want to bust the guy up and ruin the party. That Sam's a good guy."

But the brunette. What was she thinking? All she had to do was ask around a couple times and she'd know Sam Pippet was no coward. Ask around a bit and they'd tell her lots of things.

I finished drinking with Malone and spotted her across the room talking to Al Leach and glancing sidewise at me. She was already asking the questions. Al would give her the answers. "Sam Pippet. All man, Sam is. Used to be a boxer. Would have been champ except one guy he fought died a couple of days after and Sam decided to get out of the business. Scared of his own strength, Sam is. But smart. Came to this town without a cent and today he's one of Duke Snyder's biggest boys. Don't worry 'bout Sam."

When she was finished talking to Al Leach, I picked up a couple of drinks and went over to her. I introduced myself and gave her the drink. She smiled at me and told me her name was Estelle. I liked the name.

She moved in close and whispered, "I hear you're a lot of man, Sam."

I gave her the grin. I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to blow my horn. If she wanted to know how much man I was all she had to do was stick around. She'd already asked around, so now it figured she meant to do some sticking.

Malone came up and said, "I see you've met my wife, Sam."

His wife! I darn near went through the floor. But I didn't show it.

"Yeah," I said. "She's been telling me what a great guy you are." I caught her eye and she winked.

Malone shot a look at her, but he missed the wink. Then he looked at me and smiled. He didn't suspect a thing.

"We'll have to get together some time, Sam," he said.

"Yeah, we sure will," I told him.

The next night Estelle phoned

me at my apartment and asked if she could come up and see me. I told her okay. She must have been calling from some place around the corner, because it wasn't ten minutes later she was ringing my bell.

We didn't waste a lot of time talking about the weather. She liked me, and didn't beat around the bush letting me know it. I mixed a lot of drinks for us and was glad to find she was the kind of woman who could hold her liquor. She had been around plenty, this one — my kind of woman. Plenty of curves in the right places and lips that were soft and moist and sweet.

After she'd been there a couple of hours she came right out with it. "I've got to get away from Vic," she said.

I grinned. "That shouldn't be too hard to do."

"You don't know him, Sam."

"I know his type," I told her.

"I think he'd kill me if I left him," she said. "Look!" She showed me an ugly bruise on her thigh just above her hose.

"He do that?"

"Yes. And that isn't the only one. I tell you, Sam, he's cruel."

"He shouldn't be cruel to a woman like you," I told her. "He shouldn't."

She threw her arms around me. "Take me away from him, Sam. Let's go away *together.*"

"Sure," I said. But I had an idea of my own.

The following day I asked around about Malone. He was high finances; had three used-car lots, a restaurant, a hotel and was starting to get his feet wet in selling real estate. He had been in town about five years. Seems he had quite a stack of dough when he came, but nobody knew where he was from. I wasn't sure whether I was dealing with a smart guy or a lucky one.

My boss, Duke Snyder, asked me what my interest was in Malone and I told him I figured to invest in some real estate. Duke said that was fine, he liked to see his boys get ahead. I thought of Estelle and figured I was getting ahead all right.

I was already working on an idea to fix Malone. Estelle wanted to go away but I figured Malone would be the one to go away. For good.

I went down to the public library, fingered out a short note on the typewriter, addressed it to myself and mailed it. I should get it by noon the next day. It was the first step in my plan.

I went back to Duke's club. My next move was to get better acquainted with Malone. I was thinking about it when Malone phoned and invited me over for dinner.

"I think Estelle has taken a liking to you," he said. He laughed, like it was funny a woman should take a liking to me.

I didn't like his laugh, but I liked what he said even less. "Taken a liking to me?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"She tells me you used to be in the ring. She's grateful you didn't knock my block off at the party the other night. Wants to show her gratitude."

So that was the line she'd given him. That was okay. Only I didn't go for the idea of the three of us being together like that. Except for one thing—it was a good chance to move my plan along. Just so Estelle didn't try pulling any cute capers in front of him. I figured she was smart enough to know better. I told him I'd be there.

A maid answered the door and led me to the library. Malone was sitting behind a desk, Estelle was nowhere in sight.

The minute I stepped into the library there was a vicious growl and a Doberman pinscher the size of a cow leaped up from behind the desk; baring his teeth, he charged me.

I went for my gun.

"Sid!" Malone yelled.

For a second it didn't seem like the dog heard him. Then all at once it stopped and fell into a crouch. My hand was inside my coat, ready. I wasn't taking any chances. I'd seen a guy get ripped apart by one of those dogs once.

"Stand, Sid!" Malone ordered.

The dog let out a low growl and rose to his feet. "He'll be all right now, Sam."

But I wasn't sure. I don't like dogs; don't trust them. I didn't like the way that black devil was baring his teeth at me.

"Come on, Sam," Malone said. "He won't touch you."

"Maybe you better lock him up," I told him. "I don't get along good with dogs."

"He's a good dog, Sam. Don't worry."

So I brought my hand out of my coat. That was a mistake. The moment I moved my arm the black devil came at me.

"Sid!"

He was almost on me. I jerked out my gun.

"For God's sake, don't show a *gun,* Sam!"

It was too late. The devil leaped at me. I brought the gun down, but never got a chance to fire. His fangs snapped down on my wrist and pulled me off balance. The gun fell from my hand.

Malone came running over and cut the brute across the neck with the heel of his hand. "Let up, Sid!"

The dog let go and dropped into a crouch. He didn't make a sound, just lay there with his lips curled back from his teeth.

"Don't move, Sam," Malone warned. He took the dog by the collar and led him out of the room.

I checked my wrist. There were some ugly red marks, but the teeth hadn't broken the skin. My coat

had saved me there. I picked up my gun and slipped it back into my holster.

Malone came back. "I'm sorry Sam," he said. "I didn't know you carried a gun. I would have put Sid away if I had. He smells the oil. He's trained to watch out for them." His smile was apologetic enough, but the way he spoke was like I'd committed a crime carrying the rod. He must have known a guy looking out for Duke's interests would have a gun.

But I let it pass, told him it was okay. He poured us each a drink. We got to talking about real estate. I told him I had about forty grand I'd like to invest. I don't have that kind of money, only he didn't have to know that. Right away he shone up to me. He was telling me how he figured he could do some good for my investment when Estelle came in.

I got nervous. It was what she was wearing. A woman should never dress like that to entertain her husband's friends. But, as it turned out, she was a good actress. She treated me like she'd treat anyone else. Malone couldn't have possibly suspected anything.

By the time I left to go home I figured I'd put in a profitable evening. Malone was real interested in that forty thousand bucks he figured I had. And I'd found out about that dog.

When I got back to my place I went into the trunk and dug out a revolver I'd picked up in a hock shop about five years before. It was a nice gun, but I'd never used it. There was no way it could be traced back to me. I took it apart, oiled it, put it together again and tested its action. Smooth. I worked it over a few times, then took it apart and wiped off all the oil. I thought of that black devil dog of Malone's and was careful about that. I put it together again and tested the action. It worked like a charm. I filled the chamber with shells, attached my silencer to it, and put it back into the trunk. It was ready whenever I was.

I went to sleep thinking about it.

It was eleven o'clock the next morning when the doorbell woke me. It was Estelle. I brought her in quick and closed the door. She slipped her arms around me. She was wearing some kind of seductive perfume that did things. But a woman only affects me when I want her to affect me. I was mad and I let her know it.

"You shouldn't have come here like this," I told her.

"It's all right, Sam," she said.

"It isn't all right. We can't let anybody see us together."

"I thought about it all night, Sam. We can't go on like this. Let's let them see us together. I'd like you to have it out with Vic and get it over with."

"No," I told her. "Don't be nuts."

"Are you scared of him, Sam?"

"I'm not scared of nobody." I let

her know that right off. "But you've got to let me work this my way."

She looked at me. "What's your way, Sam?"

"Never mind," I told her. "Just leave it to me. But it's important we don't let anybody see us together."

She kissed me. "I'll leave it to you, Sam," she purred.

The doorbell rang.

I hiked her into the bedroom, told her to stay there and be quiet and closed the door. I hauled out a tin of room deodorant and squirted it all over the place. To kill that perfume of hers. It was a small thing, but I don't take chances. Somebody might recognize that perfume and think about it later.

The doorbell rang again and I walked over to the door and opened it. It was Malone.

"Come on in," I said without hesitating. "Glad to see you."

"I had a few minutes and thought we could talk business," he said.

I studied his face to see if he suspected anything. He didn't.

"Talk business?" I said. "Sure... Where's the dog?"

"I always leave him at the house, Sam. I have some rather valuable things there. That's why I keep him."

So the dog always stayed home. That was something to keep in mind.

He looked around the room. "Nice place you got here, Sam."

I nodded, gave him a chair and right away he started talking real estate. He sat there almost a half hour while he outlined ways he could make use of my money. I lit a cigar and listened. That was smart lighting that cigar. If any of Estelle's perfume wafted in under that bedroom door, the cigar smoke would kill it before it got anywhere.

When Malone finally left, I went over to the window and watched until I saw him get in a hack and drive away. Then I let Estelle out of the bedroom.

"That was too close," I told her. "It's coincidences like that that can ruin a set-up."

"I like the way you handled it, Sam," she told me, and asked, "What would you have done if he had found us together?"

"You know what I would have done," I said. "Nobody is going to stand between you and me."

She kissed me, long and sweet.

"But," I said, pushing her away, "you've got to be patient. And you'll have to stop taking these chances. We can't let anybody see us together. And I don't want you inviting me over to your house for any more meals."

"But I'll be able to see you, Sam," she pleaded. "I *have* to see you."

"Call me on the phone," I told her. "We'll arrange it by phone."

When she was gone I crossed

over to the window and watched her as she left the building. She didn't look up. She went straight across the street, got into a small blue coupe and drove away.

I turned from the window, started for the bedroom and stopped dead. That coupe! What if Malone had seen it parked there!

I thought about that, finally decided he hadn't noticed it. I had watched him when he left. He hadn't even glanced in that direction. And I was positive he didn't suspect anything when he was up in my apartment.

But I would have to walk easy.

I put on some clothes, went down to my mailbox and picked up the letter I had written to myself. I opened it just like a guy would when he gets a letter, and read it. *Certain people in this town don't want you nosing around, Sam Pippet. You've got twelve hours to clear out. Final warning.*

It looked like the real thing. A guy working for Duke Snyder would be apt to get a letter like that.

I walked down the street a couple of blocks to a radio shop and bought a tape recorder. Then, without going into too much detail, I told the guy how I wanted it fixed up.

"In other words," he said, "when the machine is plugged in and turned on, you want to be able to put it in gear by a brief electric current."

"And I want it to stay in gear," I told him. "So it'll keep right on going after that one shot of juice."

"Of course. That shouldn't be too difficult. A lock-in relay will do it. Feed a charge of current into the relay and it will throw the machine into gear and hold it there. But mind you the machine must be plugged in and turned on so there is electricity to run the motor once it's thrown into gear."

"Sure," I said. "I know that. How long will it take to fix it up?"

He told me it wouldn't take more than an hour. I went out, had some breakfast. When I got back the tape machine was waiting for me. I stuck it in the trunk of my car and went over to Malone's office. He was reading a joke book. I could tell by that funny look on his face that he was planning to tell me a few, but when he caught my expression he changed his mind.

"I need you, Vic," I told him. I handed him the letter I had written to myself. He read it.

"I don't understand, Sam."

"Working for Duke Snyder you step on a lot of toes," I told him. "I don't figure to leave town, but I think it's a good idea if I live careful for a while. I'd like to get me a little furnished house on the outskirts that nobody knows about. That way I'll be able to go to sleep at night without wondering whether or not I'll be around for breakfast."

He thought about it a minute and said, "I think I can help you. Come on, I'll show you the place."

It was a four room bungalow, surrounded by trees down by the river. There wasn't another house for half a block in either direction. And there was a small front porch. It couldn't be better.

We went back to Malone's office and I signed a six-month lease on the place.

"This is just between you and me," I told him. "I wouldn't want it to get around."

"I'll keep it under my hat."

"Don't tell your wife."

He frowned at me.

"I don't mean no offense," I said. "But you know how a woman likes to talk. I don't know who's after me and I wouldn't want the wrong person to know where I was sleeping nights."

"I understand," he said.

"No offense?" I asked.

"No offense."

"Good." I wanted it to stay in his mind—about not telling his wife. It was important that Estelle didn't know about the cottage.

I left him in his office and went down to my car. Just before I drove away I glanced up and saw him standing at the window watching me. I figured I knew what he was thinking. He was wondering how I had guts enough to stick around when I knew somebody was gunning for me. I grinned and drove away. The sucker.

Estelle phoned me that night, wanted to see me. I lied and told her Duke had some work for me to do. She said she'd meet me after I was finished. I told her I'd probably be working all night. She didn't like that but she accepted it and said she'd call me the next day.

That was one thing I didn't like about Estelle. She was too anxious. She didn't give a damn whether people found out about us or not. Not even her husband. But it was important to my plan that *nobody* found out. I'd have an air-tight alibi for the time Malone was killed, but even so, it'd be better if nobody suspected me of having a motive. So far as the cops would be concerned I was Malone's friend and future partner. And I remembered enough of what he'd told me about real estate to back that up.

The next afternoon I phone Malone.

"Can you meet me out at the cottage at nine o'clock tonight?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Why?"

"I'll be free then. I'd like to talk turkey about this real estate business. I want to get going on it as soon as possible, if I can."

He said he'd be there at nine. I didn't like the way he'd hesitated. Like for some reason he was nervous. But it didn't matter. He was hungry for my forty grand. He'd be there at nine. That was the important thing.

After I finished talking to Malone, I called a few of the boys and told them there would be a poker game at my apartment at seven o'clock. And to make it really look good, I invited Police Chief Parker.

When I had it all set, I picked up the tape machine, a reel of recording tape, the gun and silencer, my camera tripod, a spool of nylon thread and a few other things and drove out to the cottage.

Then I fixed up one of the smartest gimmicks any guy ever dreamed of. First I bolted the front gate. That was to make certain no outsider would come calling. Then I boarded up the back door, so that when Malone came around to the rear to get into the yard, he wouldn't try entering the house through the back door. When he saw the boards he'd just figure I'd put them there to protect myself.

After I was satisfied everything was okay outside, I went inside and rigged the gimmick.

To start with I plugged in the tape machine, turned it on and let it warm up. I attached the reel of recording tape, hooked up the microphone, snapped the dial to Record, spoke into it saying, "Come on in." I waited about three seconds and then said, "I'm in the kitchen." I turned the dial to Listen, rewound the tape and started it again.

My recorded voice came out of the speaker just like I was actually doing the talking. I wound the tape back again just past the place where my voice started. I unhooked the wires from the doorbell, attached a couple of extension wires to them and hooked the extensions to the points on the lock-in relay the technician had fixed up for me on the tape machine.

I went out to the front door and pressed the doorbell button. Instead of the door bell ringing, the relay put the machine into gear and my recorded voice came out of the speaker. "Come on in," it said; then, after a guy had about enough time to open the door, "I'm in the kitchen."

It was perfect.

I tried it again. It worked like a dream.

I fixed the trap-gun. I set up the tripod and attached the gun to it, aiming it carefully so it would catch Malone in the chest as he came through the door. Then I tied the nylon cord to the trigger and strung it in front of the door so it would catch him just above the knees. The door pulled open to the outside so there was no danger of it getting hooked up with the cord. And the front porch would prevent anybody from noticing him if the shell happened to knock him over backwards. The silencer on the gun would take care of the noise. I wasn't worried about *Malone* making any racket; not with a dum-dum in his chest.

I checked everything, turned off all the lights except the one in the

kitchen and took off. I left the front gate open and made for my car. At nine o'clock Malone would ring the doorbell, my voice would tell him to come in, he'd open the door and step inside, his leg would hit the cord and trigger the gun. At about midnight, three hours after Malone had been killed, the poker game would break up and I'd go straight back to the cottage, get rid of the tape machine, tripod and gun and call the cops. I'd show them the threatening note I'd written to myself and they'd think someone had been laying for me and got Malone by mistake. The medical examiner would find that Malone was killed at nine o'clock and I would have an ubreakable alibi.

Even Estelle would never know for sure. She'd wonder about it, but she'd never know. And I would never tell her. It's smart to keep your woman guessing.

The poker game got going about ten past seven. I played a lousy game right from the start. I tried to concentrate on the cards but couldn't. Police Chief Parker noticed it.

"What's wrong with you tonight, Sam?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, then thought better of it. He might remember this later. I brought out the threatening letter and showed it to him.

"Doing anything about this, Sam?"

I told him about the cottage. "I spend my nights there. In the daytime I figure I can look after myself." I smiled to myself. I was glad I'd told him about the note. He figured I was worrying about it. That made it stronger.

"Want me to put a watch on you?" he asked.

"Naw. I can look after myself. It's probably some practical joker."

"Better come down to headquarters and talk it over tomorrow. Bring the letter. We'll see what we can do."

"Sure." We got back to our game.

At eight-thirty the telephone rang. Everybody stopped playing and waited for me to answer it. I figured it was Estelle and I knew better than to answer it in front of these guys. I'd have to start explaining to her, and that could be bad with these guys listening.

"It's work," I said.

"Let it ring." When it finally stopped ringing I went over and laid the receiver on the table. We wouldn't be troubled with that any more.

The game broke up at eleven-thirty. When everybody had gone I high-tailed it out to the cottage. I traveled as fast as the law allowed. Chances were Parker noticed what time the game broke up. It wouldn't take too long to get rid of the gun and the other stuff, but the sooner I did it and got my call through to the cops the better it would look.

I skidded my car to a stop, headed towards the house on the run, charged up the porch steps, flashlight in hand.

Holding the light out to the side away from me, I shot the beam through the open door of the cottage.

The body lay on the floor. Just inside the doorway. I could see the black stains of blood on the floor.

A low growl came from somewhere in the cottage. I could hear a dog's claws snapping on the hardwood floor.

"Raise your light, Sam." Ice ran through me. The beam picked up Malone against the far wall of the room near the radiator.

I swung it to the floor, saw Estelle lying in the pool of her own blood just inside the doorway, half her head shot away.

I swung it back. The Doberman was leashed to the radiator.

"Thank you, Sam, for getting rid of the tramp," Malone said. "I knew all about you two. It was fun paying that call that day when she was with you. Where'd you hide her, Sam? Under the bed?" He laughed, heartily.

I moved the flash slightly and the finger of light picked up the brute straining against the broad leather leash. It was no good to go for my gun, because Malone's hand was on the leash.

"Lucky for me I'm a gentleman, Sam. Very lucky. Ladies first, you know. Don't you agree, Sam, ladies always should go first."

"You're right," I said. "She was no good. A tramp. This—was her idea."

"Was it now, Peepot? What a Goddam shame. If I'd known that I wouldn't have been so hasty."

I felt sick. My prints and no one else's would be all over that stuff. "We can make a deal. We can—"

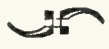
"Like I said," he cut in, "I was hasty. I called the police."

I snapped out the flash and went for my holster.

The snap of the dog's feet on the floor told me Malone had released him; I got off one shot as the teeth sank into my arm. I went over backwards, the dog on top of me, his teeth tearing into the bone. The gun slid away.

Sam, the sucker, I thought, as the black devil clamped his teeth into my cheek. I couldn't move. If I did, it would tear.

Malone's booming laughter mixed with the siren from out in the street.



The Unholy Three

An air-tight ice house out in the country is okay. But some human beings get real angry when they're locked inside one.

BY WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

I WAS TRYING to figure how to pay seven hundred and forty dollars worth of bills with three hundred and twelve dollars I had in the bank when he walked into the office. It was almost dinner time and I was hungry.

So maybe my voice was gruff. "What's your trouble, son?"

His face was thin, his eyes a deep blue and they considered me with some apprehension. He was about eleven years old. He said nothing.

"Get the wrong office?" I suggested.

He shook his head.

I tried to appear more genial. "You've been watching the private-eye shows on TV and you came in to see what a *real* one looks like, huh?"

He took a deep breath

and shook his head again, hard.

I matched his silence. I went back to evaluating which bills were most imminently disastrous. A minute of silence moved by.

Then he said, "It's my sister."

I looked up. "Oh—? Has something happened to her?"

He frowned. "Well—not yet."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. "How old is your sister?"

More hope in his glance now. "She's twenty-three. She's very pretty."

"And what's going to happen to her?"

"I don't know But she's going with a guy, a no-good guy."

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"John, John Delavan. My sister calls me Johnny."

"Okay, Johnny, listen carefully. First of all, I generally get fifty dollars a day when I work. And second, I can't stop your sister from going with a no-good guy. And third, how do you know he is one?"

"I know all right. And about the money, I thought I could owe you. I've got a paper route. You could investigate the man, couldn't you? There's no law against that."

"If your sister asked me to, I could. What about your parents?"

His face was bleak. "There aren't any. There's just me and Eileen."

Silence for a few moments, and I asked, "Do you live in the neighborhood?"

He nodded. "In the Belvoir Apartments, over on Third. You don't want the business, is that it?"

His steady gaze met mine. "Johnny," I said softly, "I don't want to charge you fifty dollars a day for work I'm not authorized to perform. Don't you see my position?"

"I see it. Sitting, that's your position. To heck with you, Mr. Puma." He turned.

"Wait, Johnny," I said. "I'm trying to be honest with you."

He didn't turn back; he continued to walk and the door slammed behind him. The glass in the door rattled, the glass that held the lettering *Joseph Puma, Investigations.*

I sighed and wondered if Eileen's suitor was really a no-good guy or just a guy who didn't like the Giants.

For some reason, I took out a card and typed on it: Eileen and Johnny Delavan — Belvoir Apartments.

Then I looked at my watch, and there was still time . . .

In The House Of Genial Lending, Max said, "How much this time?"

"Five hundred," I told him. "She's in good shape, Max. I just put on a new set of tubeless tires."

"And she'd bring six hundred in a quick sale," he said.

"That's more than I'm asking for. Of course, if you want to make it six hundred?"

"Five," he said quickly. He

sighed. "Joe, you're too bright a young man to waste your life in such a precarious profession. When are you going to get smart?"

"I'm doing better every month," I told him. "Last time I had to borrow seven hundred, remember?"

He shook his head sadly. "Bright fellow like you, it beats me . . . Where's the pink slip?"

While he was getting the papers ready, I asked him, "Do you know the Delavans who live over in the Belvoir? There's an Eileen and a Johnny."

He looked thoughtful. "Eileen Delavan? There's a girl at the bank by that name. Beautiful girl. Her parents died a couple of years ago, I think, if that's the one."

"That could be the one," I said. "Do you mean the Security Bank?"

He nodded and continued to look thoughtful. "Now, let's see, I think her brother delivers my paper. About twelve, isn't he?"

"I guess you've got the family, all right." His glance was worried. "They're not in trouble, Joe?"

I chuckled. "I doubt it. Johnny doesn't like his sister's boy friend. He wanted me to investigate him."

Max didn't smile. "Who's the boy friend? Maybe I know him, too."

"I didn't ask."

Max shook his head again. "No wonder you're always borrowing money. Some detective." He held out a sheaf of papers. "Sign all three copies."

I signed all three copies and walked out a minute later with a check for five hundred dollars. I was rich again; I went over to Heinie's for some wiener-schnitzel.

Somebody had left a paper on the table. I read that the President was progressing satisfactorily after his heart attack and the Russians were trying to get Poland into the Security Council. Locally, the Mayor was worried about the increase in juvenile delinquency.

The vision of Johnny Delavan came to me and I turned to the sport pages. A no-good guy . . . Probably because he could dance, or used slickum on his hair. Kids were too quick to judge their elders.

Reichoff, the beat cop, came in and looked around.

I called over, "Buy you a cup of coffee, Ben."

He came over and took the chair across from me. "Still eating, huh, Joe? That's pretty good, in your business."

"I make out," I told him. "I'm lining up some big accounts right now."

"Sure you are," he said tonelessly. "I saw you come out of Max's half an hour ago."

"Do you know the Delavans?" I asked him.

"Eileen and Johnny." He nodded. "Fine people. I wish all the kids in this neighborhood were like Johnny Delavan." He paused. "They're not in any kind of trouble, are they, Joe?"

I smiled. "No, Johnny came into

my office about an hour ago. He wanted me to investigate his sister's boy friend."

"And who would that be?"

I shrugged. "I didn't ask the kid."

"I'll ask him," Ben said. "I'm surprised he didn't come to me in the first place."

I stared at him. "You're kidding. You wouldn't take a kid seriously about a thing like that?"

"I'm not busy," Ben said. "I'll ask him. You never know what a question might turn up, Joe." He yawned. "Thanks for the coffee, Joe. I've got to be getting along."

He smiled and went out, two hundred and twenty pounds of municipal guardian. It has been rumored about him that he is meddlesome and nosey, but a neighborhood cop is supposed to be.

I drank another cup of coffee and went out to face my evening. At thirty-one, without a wife, an evening is something to face when I've nothing to work on.

My kitchenette apartment held no lure for me and I had seen all the movies around. One early star winked down at me.

Well, what the hell, why not? I looked up Delavan in the phone book and found the one who lived in the Belvoir Apartments.

Luckily, Johnny answered the phone.

I said, "Joe Puma, Johnny. You never did tell me the name of that fellow you want investigated."

His voice was almost a whisper. "Are you going to work on it, Mr. Puma?"

"I thought I'd give it a free neighborhood routine investigation. Is your sister home? Is that why you're speaking so quietly?"

"That's right, Mr. Puma." His voice was even lower. "The man's name is Jean Magnus and he lives at the Stratford Hotel."

"What don't you like about him, Johnny? What makes you suspicious of him?"

A feminine voice in the background said, "Who are you talking to, Johnny?"

Johnny said, "Goodbye, Mr. Puma. See you tomorrow."

The feminine voice started again before the line went dead.

Well, I knew the houseman over at the Stratford. He'd tried a spell of private work, himself. I drove over there.

Lenny Donovan, the houseman, was in the small office behind the clerk's desk. He was reading a hunting and fishing magazine.

He looked up genially. "A little cribbage, Joe? Or is this a professional call?"

"Semi-professional," I told him. "I am working free for an eleven-year-old neighborhood client."

He smiled. "Young Delavan, maybe?"

I nodded and sat down. "How did you guess?"

Lenny yawned. "The kid was hanging around here evenings,

hanging around the lobby with those big eyes and ears of his wide open. I ran him out."

"His sister's going with one of your guests."

"Oh—?" Lenny looked interested. "He wouldn't tell me why he was hanging around." He pulled at one ear. "Who's the guest?"

"A man named Jean Magnus."

Lenny reached forward to thumb through a card index box. "That would be—let's see—324. Oh, yes, big Victor Mature type. Real charmer. I can't blame Johnny's sister. This boy's really got it."

"What's his line?"

"Promotion, investments, speculation. You know, Joe, a wheel."

"Self employed?"

Lenny frowned. "Aren't you getting a little nosey, Joe? This man's got one of the better suites."

"Is it all right if I go up and talk to him?"

Lenny's frown was deeper. "Because a kid doesn't like him? This isn't much of a job, but I'm happy in it. Let's get to the cribbage." He reached into a drawer and brought out a cribbage board.

I shook my head.

I stood up. "Mind if I sit in the lobby for a while?"

"I sure as hell do. You're really reaching for business, aren't you, Joe?"

"It's hard to find," I admitted. "Well, get some exercise; you look a little jowly."

"That's because I eat regular. Good night, Joe." He was chuckling as I left.

There really wasn't any reason for me to feel annoyed. I had made an ass of myself and Lenny had pointed it out. I continued to feel annoyed. I knew what Lenny was earning; 340 a month and his room. He didn't have to be so superior; I'd turned down the job.

I was going through the door to the street, immersed in my own self pity when I ran into a large hunk of man.

We both bounced and then he growled, "Why'n hell don't you look where you're going?"

The face was broad, and for a moment a flare of incomplete recognition flickered in my memory, then died.

"Sorry," I said, and tried to recapture the near-memory. "Haven't me met?"

"Head-on," he agreed, and went through the doorway.

Overhead, the star was lost. In front of me, traffic growled and smoked. All around me, the lights were beckoning to buy, drink, dance or see a movie. The Chev started with a whine, and I headed her toward the Belvoir.

In the lobby, I took the phone off the hook and pressed the buzzer for the Delavan apartment.

A feminine voice came metallically through the speaker, and I said, "Could I speak with Johnny?"

"He's at a Scout meeting. Who is this?"

"John Foster Dulles," I said, and replaced the phone.

From there, I went to the East Side Station. Buddy Loeske called Headquarters for me and they had nothing on a Jean Magnus. That ended my day; I went home.

It would have ended my involvement with the Delavan problem, except for two things that happened next day. For one thing, Johnny came to see me at noon.

"Sis is burning up," he told me. "When you phoned, I told her you were my route supervisor, but she didn't believe me. And then when you talked to her last night, she knew something fishy was going on."

"I don't blame her for burning. How did she ever meet this Magnus?"

"He came into the bank to rent a safety deposit box and she took care of him. What did you find out, Mr. Puma?"

"Nothing. Except that you'd been hanging around the Stratford lobby. And what did you find out, doing that?"

"I found out Magnus' name isn't Jean. One of his friends called him Nick, right there in the lobby."

"Oh? Anything else?"

He shook his head, his eyes intent on mine.

"Johnny," I said patiently, "what's your real beef with this Magnus? Don't you want your sister to get married? Is that it?"

"That's not it. He's no good. He's got a big lard bucket friend looks just like a crook. I saw him a lot of times when I was watching the hotel." Johnny took a deep breath. "And then there's a little ratty guy he knows, too."

"Crooks don't look like anything special," I told him gently. "You've been seeing too many movies, Johnny."

He gave me a look of complete scorn. "Okay. So I'm a dope. I've been earning money for two years, but I'm a dope. Okay. So-long" He turned and went out.

The second thing that happened was that my phone rang, and it was the assistant manager at the Stratford. He wanted to know if I knew where Lenny Donovan was.

I told him I didn't and asked him why he thought I would.

"The clerk told me you came to see Mr. Donovan last night. He didn't show up for work this morning and I've exhausted every other source of possible information."

"Doesn't he stay there at the hotel?"

"He does. And his clothes are in the room, all except for those he was wearing last night."

"I've no idea where he is."

"Thank you, anyway. And incidentally, Mr. Puma, in the event Mr. Donovan hasn't an adequate excuse for his absence, would you be interested in the job here?"

He should have asked me *before* Max lent me the five hundred. I said with simple dignity,

"I'm sorry. My living costs are too great for that."

I thought I hear him chuckle when I hung up. He knew I ate at Heinie's.

So Jean is called Nick and Donovan is missing. Not really important facts, and nobody was paying me. I went out for lunch.

I was halfway through the giant-sized bowl of clam chowder when the girl came in and walked over to Heinie. And then Heinie pointed at me, and she came my way.

Red hair and fine figure and dressed in nice, if modest, clothes. Under other circumstances, a girl it would be a pleasure to meet.

But now her eyes were blazing and the fine body seemed rigid. "Joseph Puma?" she asked me.

I stood up and nodded. "At your service, M'am."

"I don't want your service. Are you also John Foster Dulles, by any chance?"

I smiled. "Occasionally. I have a lot of disguises."

"I can imagine. Any of them would be better than the one you're wearing. And what gives you the right to establish a residence in my hair?"

"I didn't know I had," I said. "Just exactly what is your complaint, M'am? And your name?"

"My name," she said evenly, "is Eileen Delavan. Last night, an officer Ben Reichoff interrogated me. He said you had told him something that needed investigating. And you were the one who talked to Johnny on the phone last night, weren't you?"

"No M'am. Are you having some kind of trouble, Miss Delavan?"

"Too much. And I'll thank you to stay out of my business. Is that clear?"

"That's clear enough. You're welcome. Believe me, Miss Delavan, you're badly confused, but I haven't the time nor the patience to quarrel publicly about it. Could you keep your voice down?"

She glared and glared and then uttered something between a snort and cough and turned and stalked out. The patrons in Heinie's were all smiling; it's a small place and her voice had unusual clarity.

I finished my clam chowder and went over to the Stratford.

Lenny was still missing, the assistant manager told me. That fact hadn't yet been reported to the police.

I asked, "Is Mr. Magnus still occupying Suite 324?"

He nodded. "What would that have to do with Mr. Donovan?"

"I'm not sure it has anything to do with that. Has Lenny been drinking at all?"

The man shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. Not enough to interfere with his duties, at any rate."

"And he left no message behind?"

"None." He paused. "What about this Mr. Magnus, Joe? Why did you ask about him?"

I shrugged. "I was talking to Lenny about him last night. There's a possibility Lenny went to see him and Magnus would then be the last man to have seen Lenny before he disappeared. But that's way out in left field. I haven't any substantial reason for thinking there's anything fishy about Mr. Magnus."

"What insubstantial reason would you have?"

"The dislike of an eleven or twelve-year-old boy, the brother of a girl Magnus is going with."

The manager looked at me queerly. Then he sighed.

"It's not quite that ridiculous," I protested.

He sighed once more. "We are certainly fortunate we didn't manage to secure your doubtful services, Fearless Fosdick. Well, drop in again, but not soon, please?"

"To hell with you," I said, and gave him my back.

Going through the lobby, I felt an urgent need for a drink. I turned right, into the bar. It was a dim and quiet bar. Two men with brief cases were on stools at the far end, quietly downing an after-lunch drink. In a corner booth, there were three men who interested me more.

One of them was the bulky man I'd bumped into going out of the lobby last night. The other was small, ratty looking. The third had a dark-haired, dark-eyed charm I could guess would appeal to some undiscerning women.

I thought their talking ebbed when I came within vision and I thought they examined me with interest. There wasn't any doubt in my mind that this was the unholy trinity Johnny had described.

The bartender came up with his smile and I ordered a bourbon and water. The two men with briefcases discussed the merits of term insurance. The three men in the booth directly behind me discussed nothing.

When the bartender brought my drink, I asked, "You haven't seen Lenny Donovan around this morning, have you?"

The bartender shook his head. "And he's usually in by this time."

"If you see him," I said, "you can tell him I got the information he asked me for."

The man nodded. "And your name?"

"Joe Puma. He knows me. My office is right over on Third Street." I paused. "I'm a private investigator."

Can a silence deepen? I thought the one behind me did.

The bartender wasn't aware of it if it existed. He said blandly, "I'll be sure to tell him and he's bound to come in. Lenny couldn't go a whole day without a drink."

"He didn't show up for work this morning," I said. "Maybe he's doing his drinking somewhere else. Well, I'll try a couple of his favorite haunts." I finished my drink. "I've got to find him."

In my office, I was looking busy when he came in. He had a rather worried smile on his dark face. "Are you—currently available?" he asked me.

I nodded, and indicated my customer's chair. "Sit down, Mr.—?"

"Magnus," he supplied. "Jean Magnus. I was in the bar over at the Stratford when I heard you ask about Leonard Donovan."

"Oh, yes. With a briefcase, weren't you?"

He shook his head, studying me. "I was in a booth right behind you. Maybe you didn't see me."

"I'll have to admit I didn't notice you, Mr. Mangus. What brings you here?"

"Magnus," he corrected me. "Mr. Donovan's disappearance is what brings me here. Do you know him very well?"

I shook my head. "Very slightly. Through the manager of the Stratford. Is he a friend of yours?"

Magnus smiled. "Hardly. He was married to my sister. He owes her some back alimony."

"Oh? And you followed him to the Stratford?"

Magnus shook his head. "It just happened that I ran into him there. I tried to reason with him. And now he's disappeared."

"Leaving his clothes behind."

Magnus frowned. "Are you sure? That isn't what the manager told me."

"It's what he told me, an hour ago. Did he tell you anything else?"

Magnus shook his head again. "He just didn't mention it, either way. Well, that would indicate he's coming back, wouldn't it? So I suppose there'd be no point in my hiring you."

"To find Lenny? If he's an alimony dodger, you wouldn't need me. The police would be happy to look for him."

"I don't want to make trouble for Lenny. He's lacking in a sense of responsibility, but I think he's open to reason. Jail wouldn't be any solution for him or my sister."

I said nothing, studying the handsome, grave face in front of me.

Magnus took a deep breath. "I've an idea where Lenny is. But I don't think I should be the one to go out there and find out. Could I hire you for that?"

I nodded.

"It's a cottage at Elk Lake," he went on. "Do you know where Elk Lake is?"

I nodded again.

"A girl lives there—well, a woman, really. Around forty. Very attractive woman, and the reason Lenny left my sister. There's a fifty-fifty chance Lenny could be there."

"Her name?" I asked.

"Amalie Johnson, Mrs. Amalie Johnson. She's a widow. The cottage is a fieldstone place, about three houses off the main road on Elk Lane. Her name should be on the mailbox."

"I could check," I said. "And what would you want me to tell Lenny?"

"Tell him I can give him a better job than he has if he is willing to resume his alimony payments. Tell him to use his head for a change. I'll be waiting for his call."

"And wouldn't it be just as simple for you to tell him when he comes back to the hotel? Remember, his clothes are still there; he must be coming back."

Magnus looked at me thoughtfully. "Is business that good, Mr. Puma? Or don't you want *my* business?"

"I can always use the money," I told him. "But I get paid whether Lenny is there or not. That would be fifty dollars, and gas, for the trip."

He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out an alligator wallet. He put two twenties and a ten on my desk. "The gas you can bill me for later."

"Check," I said. "I should be back before midnight. You'll be at the hotel?"

He rose and smiled. "I'll be waiting."

Once out of town, I ran the Chev up to a steady sixty-five. Elk Lake was right off the highway and the directions Magnus had given me should be complete enough.

As I drove, I tried to remember where I had seen that heavy man before, the man I'd collided with. The face was ringing a very dim bell in my memory and I had a vague feeling there had been a number under the face last time I'd seen it.

So Johnny's visit hadn't been completely fruitless. I was now earning fifty dollars because of my interest in Jean Magnus. Plus gas. The Chev doesn't use any oil.

Magnus could be as phoney as he sounded. And this could be a wild goose chase. I'd know, when the door opened at Elk Lake. If a woman answered the door, there'd be reason to believe his story.

If a woman didn't answer the door, I wouldn't be too badly off. Because my hand would be on my .38 in my jacket pocket.

At the turn-off, there was a small grocery store and boat-rental station and two unattended gasoline pumps. The first mailbox after that was weather-worn and in the gathering dusk I couldn't make out the name.

Three houses up from there, however, the name of Amalie Johnson was blackly clear on an aluminum-painted box. The flag was down.

The lawn was gray and the earth around the shrubs showed no signs of recent watering. It looked like a rented house to me, or the house of an uncaring owner. I touched the bell.

The sound of door chimes and footsteps, the rasp of a latch and an attractive, dark-haired woman

looked at me wordlessly from the open doorway.

"Mrs. Johnson?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'm looking for a man named Leonard Donovan," I told her.

A few seconds more of silence and then she asked, "Why?"

"I have a message which could profit him. Is he here?"

She shook her head. "He's gone to the store. He's due back any moment, though. Won't you come in?"

I started in and something hit me from behind. I'll never know where the blow came from—maybe someone hiding under the stoop. But as I fell and the skyrockets flared out in my brain, I remembered where I'd seen the face of the bulky man.

I came to, smelling wet sawdust mixed with a faint odor of fish. Under me, I could feel the splintery planking of what seemed to be a thick floor. There was a bitter, bile-like taste in my mouth. My .38 was gone.

The room was completely black, but one guess as to my whereabouts seemed likely. I was probably in one of those lake icehouses, insulated by sawdust and imprisoned by heavy planking all around. Screaming wouldn't do me a damned bit of good. I moved, and a voice said, "You coming around, Puma?"

"I'm alive. Lenny, is it?"

"Right. They conned me, too."

"You went up to talk to Magnus, then, after I left you?"

"Not right away. When I saw him with Dutch Schroeder I got nosey."

That was the big man, Dutch Schroeder. He was a reformed safe cracker, and he used to give lectures on his former art. I'd heard one of his lectures when I was still with the Department.

"You got nosey, Lenny," I guessed, "and tried to put the bite on them. And they took care of you."

"Now wasn't that a hell of a thing to say. You think I'm a crook, or something?"

"Yup. Or you'd have gone to the police."

"Huh! Like you did? We're sharing this room, honor-bright. How come you didn't go to the police?"

"Well," I said, "I'll tell you how it was. Magnus came to me and said you were his former brother-in-law. And you were behind in your alimony payments and he knew you were shacked-up with the Widow Johnson up here. He paid me fifty dollars to send me up here to reason with you. I didn't believe a word of it, and I'm surprised to find you here, Lenny. You know, I'm beginning to think that kid was right."

Lenny said, "They've got both of us out of the way. They're going to knock off the Third Street Se-

curity Bank. Tonight or early tomorrow sometime."

"You're not as lousy a detective as I thought."

"You see, Magnus plans it. Schroeder tackles the safe. The little trigger-itchy punk handles the door, Schroeder's wife out there the car. Quick and easy and off to South America for the sun. Some life, huh, Joe? I heard them discuss it before they threw me in here."

"Lenny, is this an ice-house?"

"It sure as hell is."

"Aren't they usually air-tight?"

Lenny said too quietly, "The good ones are. I noticed I could breathe much easier right after they opened that door to throw you in here. It's a rented cottage, Joe. When they leave, the owner might not be around for weeks."

"Isn't there anything around we could use to batter a hole with?"

"Nothing," Lenny said. "One chance I thought I had—that latch handle pivot goes right through that planking door. But I've torn two fingers to hell trying to turn it."

I got slowly to my feet and inched toward the wall. I followed it by touch until I came to the door. The nut on this side of the pivot had been pinned to prevent the thread from turning. It was immovable.

I said, "You lived for over twelve hours in this air. Maybe the place isn't air-tight."

"Maybe it isn't. But Joe, it's food-tight."

"And if we screamed and hollered and beat on the walls with our shoes?"

"Now? Or after they've gone?"

It was autumn; who'd be around after the quartette left? Who'd be around to hear what little noise that would emerge through those double planking walls filled with sawdust?

But now? Could we make them nervous with a racket now?

They would come with guns, undoubtedly. We were still alive, but would we be after they came with the guns?

Lenny said, "I figure they'll hole up here for a couple days after the job. This lake doesn't get much traffic in the fall. That Magnus is a cool operator."

"The door is our best bet," I said. "If we kept kicking away right under that latch . . ."

Silence from Lenny.

I reached for a cigarette and then decided not to crumb up the air any more than necessary. My lighter was still in my pocket; I lighted it for a look around.

Planking walls, planking ceiling and floor. Meat hooks were set in rows along the ceiling. Lenny looked pale in the flickering light.

"And there are two walls like that," Lenny said, "with sawdust between."

"The door is only one thickness, though."

"That's right. Two by sixes bolted to the cross-pieces."

"How about the ceiling? That's usually single. The blocks of ice are put in the sawdust around the sides, aren't they?"

"So we can break through the ceiling if our heads are hard enough. Do you want to start?"

"Well, damn it," I said, "we can't just sit here! Which way is the lake?"

"Right behind here, about thirty feet."

"Lenny," I said, "I'm going to holler. And if they open that door, I'm going to make a break for it. It should be dark out there. How about you?"

"I'm alive," he said. "And I figure if I don't move and keep my mouth shut, I've got a small chance to stay that way. I figure you haven't got any chance your way."

"Okay," I said. "But I don't want to spend the rest of *my* life in an ice house." I began to hammer on the door with a shoe. I had taken both of them off.

In only a little more than a minute, I heard the back door of the house slam and a few seconds after that, a man's voice asked, "What the hell's all the commotion about?"

"I've got a broken arm," I said. "I want a doctor."

"You'll have worse than that if you don't shut up. We're not playing games, shamus."

"I want a doctor," I repeated, and began to hammer on the door again.

"Damn you," he said, and then I heard the rasp of the latch.

I slammed into the door as it started opening.

There was a curse and I saw him on the ground as I burst through. He was the little man. He had an awful big gun in his hand and was swinging it right toward my belly. My kick got his hand.

I jumped sideways, raced for the lake. There was a pier leading out about twenty feet.

I heard a big boom and something flicked away the lobe of my ear. As I hit the water, another shot missed me by inches.

I didn't swim out. I stayed under and made the big turn, back under the protection of the pier. The water was clear and calm.

My ear burned like fury, my right foot throbbed from the kick. A post of the pier brushed my shoulder, and I came up for air, hidden by the boards overhead.

I heard the woman say, "Did he get away?"

"Nope. I know I hit him. See the blood?"

"But wouldn't he come up, if he was hit?"

The little man said. "Yeah, when he starts to bloat, he'll come up. But we'll be a long way from here then."

"I'm going to watch, anyway," the woman said. "He might just be injured."

My hand went to my ear and came away red. I heard footsteps above me, I went under again.

When my lungs began to burn and spots flared on my eyelids, I came up.

I heard the woman say, "How about the other one?"

"I guess he likes that ice house. We'll leave him there. How long can he live without food?"

"I see," the woman said thoughtfully. "You've got a point there, George."

"Come on. Will be late getting into town. That would throw everything out of schedule."

"Just one second. We gotta be sure. I want another look under this pier."

I grabbed a post to hang onto when I went down this time. I was starting to get weak. The bullet that had torn away my ear lobe had creased the side of my jaw and I was losing a lot of blood.

When it was a question of drowning in one more second, I came up for air again. And heard footsteps on the boards above and sent up a small prayer of deliverance.

My handkerchief was wet and cold in my jacket pocket. I put it to ear. Was there an artery running along the jaw line? I didn't know. I wondered if Lenny knew.

The way it turned out, I'm glad I didn't release Lenny first.

When I heard the car start I started for the house. I made it. I couldn't have gone a hundred yards more, but I made the phone.

Captain MacGill in town didn't waste any of my breath with foolish questions. He promised to send the nearest doctor.

Then I turned back toward Lenny. I got through the door and five steps into the front yard before I collapsed.

I came to in an amber room on a hard bed. A face came into focus and it was Johnny's face.

"You're going to be all right," he said.

"Johnny, you're in the Scouts. Is there an artery running along the jaw there?"

He nodded. "You almost didn't make it, Mr. Puma. Mr. Magnus didn't. He got killed when they staked out the bank. Guess that's not much loss, huh?"

"I'm no judge of that. How about Lenny Donovan, that hotel dick?"

"He's trying to cut himself in," Johnny said. "But I got that straightened out. He and those crooks used to huddle plenty. I told Mr. Donovan it would be best if he just kept his mouth shut."

"I'm not following you, Johnny."

"Like I said, he's trying to cut himself in. I mean he was. He isn't any more, since I told him how often I'd seen him with those crooks."

"On what, cut himself in on *what,* Johnny?"

"On the ten grand reward. That's the Banker's Protective Alliance Security—you know, standard reward. I'm glad the cops didn't get to 'em before they made the try though, huh, Mr. Puma?"

I took a deep breath. "Who did you figure deserved the reward, Johnny?"

"Fifty-fifty, you and me. I was the finger, right? And you were the arm. We're not going to have any trouble about that, are we, Mr. Puma? We're not going to argue some more, are we?"

"No," I agreed. "You're too much for me, Johnny. Where am I?"

"At St. Mary's. I figured this was the best bet. I don't trust those small-town hospitals. I'll bet you don't know who's here?"

"I'll bet I do. I'll bet it's your beautiful sister."

He smiled. "Right. And she sure isn't mourning that Magnus slob. Well, I'll bring her in and she can apologise to you, but you'll have to take it from there, Mr. Puma. I can't handle everything."

"Okay, Johnny," I said humbly. "Shoo her in; I'll give it my best."

Night Shift

John Yurko, of New Britain, Conn. was puzzled. He complained to police that he worked on an excavation each day, but the hole never seemed to get any bigger. Investigation officers learned that someone had been shoveling dirt back into the hole each night after Yurko went home.

Wrong Direction

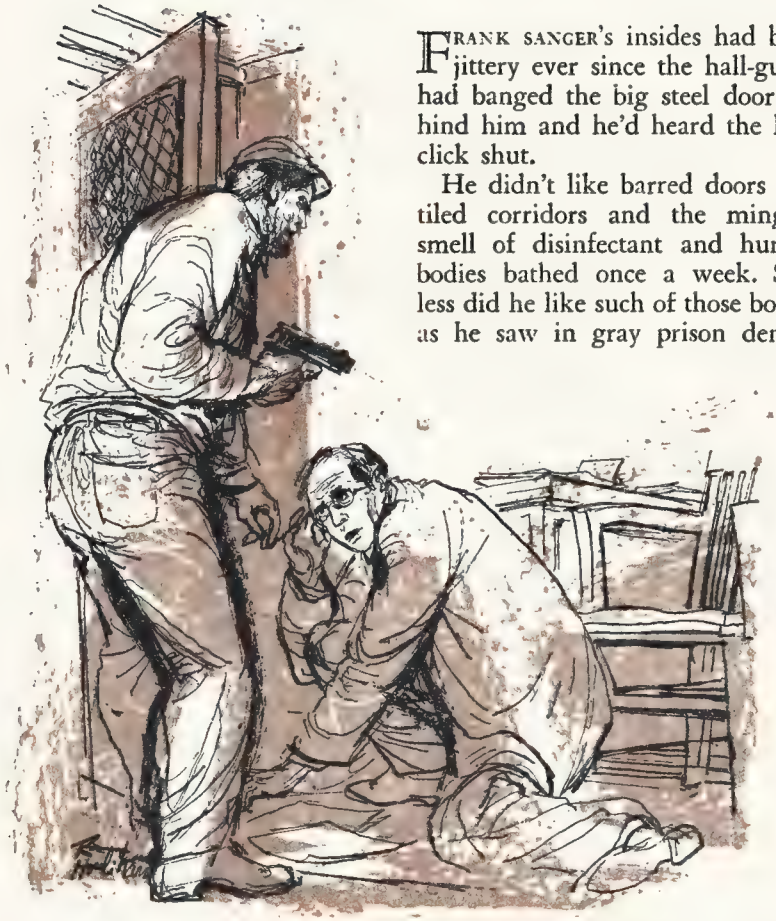
When a bandit seized a $3,000 payroll she was carrying, Gloria Gallo, 30, of New York City, ran toward a nearby parked car to ask the driver to help her catch the thief. But the robber beat her to the automobile. It was the getaway car.

Super Service

In Council Bluffs, Iowa, whenever a motorist protests against posting a bond on a traffic violation, the police desk sergeant is prepared. The sergeant merely points to a sign on the wall. It reads: "Try our lay-away plan."

10 Minutes To Live

BY
GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT



FRANK SANGER'S insides had been jittery ever since the hall-guard had banged the big steel door behind him and he'd heard the lock click shut.

He didn't like barred doors and tiled corridors and the mingled smell of disinfectant and human bodies bathed once a week. Still less did he like such of those bodies as he saw in gray prison denim,

A jail-break is no place for a rabbit . . . a human, quivering rabbit of a man like Frank Sanger.

with numbers on their pockets, puttering with brooms or brass polish or just walking along aimlessly under the casual eye of an occasional guard. Why, a man might be murdered in here before those guards could turn around. They ought to be kept locked up in cells. Sanger walked faster. He kept his eyes straight to the front, not looking directly at any of the gray men he passed. They gave him the creeps.

He wouldn't be happy until he was back out front again in his own safe little world, with the rest of the crew from the State Auditor's department. Resentment simmered in Sanger's mind—why did Weisselmann, senior auditor, have to pick *him* to go inside the prison just because Weisselmann thought the personnel records in the Deputy Warden's office ought to be examined as part of the audit? Those records were certainly going to get one fast spit-and-promise check, Sanger decided. What he wanted was out of here.

He felt a little better when he came to the end of the last tiled corridor and a guard opened a barred door and let him out into the sunlit yard. Then his escort said, "There's the deputy's office, in that little brick building right across the way."

Sanger swallowed. He liked the look of that little building less than anything else he'd seen in Deer Falls Prison. It was a square, two-storied structure, with every window not only barred but covered with wire mesh screens. Above it brooded the stark concrete rampart of the prison wall. Three or four gray men were in sight out in the yard, moving in that aimless fashion which, to Sanger's fermenting imagination, might be a mask for the most sinister intentions. But this horrible brick cubicle was worst of all. A man could be trapped in there, done to death and no one the wiser.

Sanger wobbled over the threshold. Inside was a corridor where the gloom was relieved only by a single electric bulb. A guard sat underneath it with his chair tipped back against the white-washed wall. He glanced toward them—he was a big fellow with a round, putty-colored face. A nightstick leaned against the wall beside his chair.

"Man from the State Auditor's office to see the deputy, Gus," said Sanger's escort. "In here, mister." He was motioning toward a door to the left of the entrance. Sanger could just force his reluctant feet to carry him through it. Once inside, though, he felt better. This was an office, with all the familiar fixings: a big desk, filing cabinets, chairs, a water cooler, charts on the walls studded with colored pins.

A shortish man in a light-colored summer suit got up from his swivel chair and came around the desk to greet Sanger. He was shaped like a top, small feet tapering up through

narrow hips to a barrel chest and a spherical knob of a head. He gave Sanger a bleak flicker of a smile and an iron handshake.

"I'm Connolly, deputy warden," he said in a toneless voice. "Glad to see you, Mr. Sanger. I've got the stuff you want to see right here. Have a chair. You needn't wait, Erskine. I'll take Mr. Sanger back outside."

And you won't have to wait long for that, either, thought Sanger. He lowered his skinny body to the edge of a straight wooden chair at the end of the desk.

Connolly sat down too, picked up the first of a neat pile of ruled forms.

"As of the noon count today, Mr. Sanger," he went on, "we had twelve hundred and seventy eight inmates all told. This graph shows the distribution, supported by these count-slips signed by the guards on duty and initialed by the day captain. Four hundred and twelve in Cell Block A, five hundred and one in Cell Block B, three hundred and fifty in Cell Block C—that's a new wing, it's smaller than the other two—and fifteen in this building where we are now."

Sanger twitched. "Fif-fifteen here in this little building?" he quavered. "Why?"

"Four of 'em are in solitary cells right back of this office," the deadpan deputy explained. "That's for punishment—minor infractions of the rules, nothing serious. But upstairs on the second floor is what we call the isolation tier. That's where we keep men who're not fit to be trusted even with the limited amount of freedom a convict can ordinarily enjoy inside these walls —men who have to be kept constantly under lock and key for the protection of their fellow-convicts. Men like Tiger Tolland. You've heard of Tiger Tolland, maybe?"

Sanger felt the skin crawl on the back of his scrawny neck at the very thought that Tiger Tolland was right there above him, with only one thickness of concrete in between. He'd heard of Tiger Tolland all right; who hadn't? Every newspaper in the state had blasted the Governor for commuting Tolland's death sentence to life imprisonment after last year's payroll robbery which had cost the lives of two men—one of them a bookkeeper whom Sanger had known.

"If we could get on with these records, Mr. Deputy," he pleaded. "It's three o'clock, and—"

"Certainly," agreed the deputy as Sanger's hesitant voice wavered off into silence. "There's nothing much to 'em. And don't worry about Tolland. Gustafson out there in the corridor is one of our best keepers. That's why he's on this detail. Now then—"

Out in the corridor there was a thud and a scraping noise as of a tipped-back chair coming suddenly to all fours. Something clattered, like a nightstick dropped on a con-

crete floor. The deputy's head snapped erect.

"Gus!" he called.

"Gus is busy right now, dep'ty," a rasping voice said.

A huge, square block of a man filled the doorway—a man in prison gray, with a blue-black automatic held steadily in his right hand. Little cruel red-rimmed eyes glittered amid a matted tangle of whiskers from which jutted a great, arrogant beak of a nose.

Sanger had seen that nose and those eyes on too many front pages for prison-grown whiskers to disguise them now. This was Tiger Tolland.

Tolland walked slowly toward the desk, his gun trained on the deputy. The room filled with the odor of the man, a reek such as Sanger had smelt as a child in the lion-house at the Zoo: the smell of a wild beast too long caged. Sanger sat frozen, a cornered rabbit.

"Where'd you get the gun, Tolland?" asked the deputy. There was neither fear nor any other emotion in his even tone. He leaned back a little in his swivel chair; his hands lay inert on the edge of his desk.

Yellow teeth showed in a feral grin. "Bring Gus on in here, Rukey," Tolland ordered.

The blue-clad guard was coming through the door now. Behind him were two more convicts—one thin-faced and haggard, the other a blond whose hot eyes were sizzling with excitement. Both had guns. The kid was prodding Gustafson along.

"Dep'ty wants t' know how we got th' rods, Gus," Tolland chuckled.

"Two of Tolland's old mob picked up my little girl on the way home from school last night," Gustafson muttered. "She's nine years old."

"Like that," said the deputy, as one who needs no further explanation. There was even a hint of compassion in his voice.

"We're wastin' time, Tiger," snapped the thin-faced convict.

But Tolland's attention had shifted to Sanger.

"Who's th' punk?" he demanded.

"State Auditor's office. Nothing to do with you," the deputy answered.

"He's in my way," snarled Tolland. He took a step toward Sanger, kicked sidewise as a horse might kick. His foot crashed into Sanger's stomach, and Sanger crashed into the corner of the office amid the splinters of the chair. After a stunned instant the pain came and he began to vomit.

Through the successive waves of nausea and agony he could hear Tolland talking to the deputy.

"Here's the deal, dep'ty. Gus is gonna call the screw on the side gate, tell him we got ya an' we're comin' out wit' ya. If he opens the gate, okay. There's always cars outside in the parkin' lot. Once we're on our way, we'll throw ya out

down the road a piece, you'n'Gus 'n' this punk in the corner. If he don't open the gate, that's too bad for all three of ya."

"No dice," said the deputy.

Tolland grabbed the deputy by the front of his shirt, dragged him upright from his chair. His gun-barrel smashed gainst the deputy's face and bright blood spurted. Again. Sanger, quivering in his corner, seemed to feel the crunching impacts.

"Say no dice to me, will ya?" screamed Tolland. "You walkin' out now?" He shook the deputy furiously, blood spattered around the room.

"Kill me if you want to, Tiger," the deputy gasped. "And hang for it. But I'm not walking outa here on my two feet to help you rats break prison—and maybe get more good men killed trying to stop you."

"God damn ya!" Tolland jabbed the deputy in the mouth with the gun-butt. Sanger heard teeth splinter under the relentless steel. He hugged his empty stomach, tried to vomit again.

The deputy was sagging over the desk, spitting out blood and teeth. Tolland dragged him erect again, the clotted gun raised for another blow.

"You can dish it out, Tiger," spluttered the deputy through his smashed lips. "Wonder 'f you can take—" Tolland's gun crashed against his temple and he went down in a heap against the wall.

"Lay off, fer Cri'sake, Tiger," snapped the thin-faced man. "You'll kill him an' then we ain't got nothin' t' dicker wit'."

Gustafson had turned his face away; his shoulders were shaking.

Tolland snarled something at the thin-faced man, started around the desk to get at the deputy again.

The telephone on the desk shrilled. Tolland halted.

"Answer it, Gus," Tolland ordered. "Be goddam careful whatcha say."

Gustafson picked up the 'phone. "Deputy's office. Gustafson. Who? Sanger? Yeah. He's here, but he's gone to the john. Sure, I'll tell him." He hung up, looked wearily at Tolland.

"Sanger's boss up in the front office wants him to call back," he said. "That's Sanger there in the corner."

"Wonderful," said the thin convict. "Ya fix the dep'ty, so's he can't walk, an' ya got rabbit-face over there fixed so's he can't talk. Now what, master-mind?"

"Yeah, now what?" the kid demanded. "If this guy don't call back in a coupla minutes they'll be ringin' again. We're gettin' fresh outa time."

They both stared at Tolland.

Cunning stirred somewhere in the depths of Sanger's tortured mind. If they let him talk to Weisselmann, it was a cinch that a couple of stalling answers would get Weisselmann suspicious. Weis-

selmann was very quick on the uptake.

He tried to say "I can talk". His lips moved, his vocal cords strained —from his mouth there came only an obscene sort of gobbling noise.

"Put him on the phone, Tiger," mocked Thin-face. "Let 'em hear him goin' on thataway. Nobody'll even guess anything's outa line."

"Shut yer trap, Rukey!" rasped Tolland, "'r I'll shut it for ya. You, Gus—git the warden on the line."

Gustafson swallowed. "What'll I say?"

"Git him. I'll do the sayin'," Tolland retorted.

The deputy sat against the wall, his chin on his breast. Blood dripped from his shattered face. Sanger wanted to crawl to him, to try to help him. But he could no more move than he could talk.

Gustafson was saying: "This is Gustafson in isolation. I want to speak to Warden Terhune." The two convicts behind him waited, guns ready; their eyes were fixed on Tolland.

"Warden? This is Gustafson, sir —"

Tolland snatched the telephone out of his hand.

"This is Tiger Tolland," he roared. "Warden, me an' two of the boys have got yer goddam dep'ty under our guns. Him and Gustafson and some office punk. You want 'em back, you git a coupla cars at the side gate pronto an' open up fer us. Come over here shootin', an' we run 'em all out. Ya got that?"

The phone squawked and sputtered with the intensity of Warden Terhune's rage.

"Okay, Warden," Tolland said. "Have it yer own way. But we'll kill these three first an' we got bullets enough to kill half a dozen more lousy screws 'fore ya git in here. Ya think we're worth it?" He slammed the instrument back in its cradle.

"Let him chew on it," he said. "He's gotta give in. But meantime —you, Rukey, keep yer gun on Gus. Kid, get them fire buckets out in the corridor 'n' fill 'em with fresh water 'fore Terhune starts rememberin' he kin cut our water off."

"Ya mean we're gonna just stick here an' wait?" demanded Rukey.

Tolland whirled, a sweep of his left hand knocking the gun from Rukey's grasp as Tolland's gun-muzzle jammed against Rukey's stomach.

"Who's runnin' this caper?" Tolland commanded.

"Ya—you are, Tiger," gasped Rukey, his eyes popping.

"Don't fergit it ag'in, or it'll be yer last fergittin'," Tolland warned. "Now pick up yer gun an' ride herd on Gus while the kid gits the water. I see some screws comin' outa the main cell-block. We might have a li'l trouble convincin' 'em we mean business."

Out in the prison yard, where the

flood-lights glared, something was thumping and clanking, a persistent clanking like the fetters of a laboring giant.

Sanger, quiet in his dark corner, watched the bushy shadow of Tolland's head, faintly outlined against the threadbare prison blanket which had been hung on the window to shut off the glare of the spotlights. He guessed that Tolland was peering through a hole in the blanket to see what this new noise might be.

Nearby, Sanger could hear the deputy breathing in sputtering gasps. He had crawled stealthily over after it got dark and washed the blood from the deputy's face with his own tin-cup ration of water; he'd even got a few drops of water through the smashed lips. The deputy was still unconscious, but Tolland had put handcuffs and leg-irons on him just in case. Gustafson, also ironed, was out in the corridor. Sanger was unbound. Tolland regarded him as beneath notice. "He's so right," thought Sanger. He wondered if the deputy was going to die. Sanger didn't like the sound of his breathing. If he died, Tolland would hang. Yet Tolland had made no effort to keep his victim alive.

Sanger wondered what time it was; he couldn't see his watch. Must be ten o'clock at least. Seven hours. Could it have been only seven hours since Tiger Tolland had walked into that office? How much longer could this stand-off last? The warden didn't dare try to storm the isolation building for fear Tolland would kill the deputy and Gus and Sanger. Tolland didn't dare kill any of his hostages because his only hope was that the warden would make a deal with him.

There was a loud-speaker out there. Several times Warden Terhune's voice had urged the other convicts to overpower Tolland and rescue the hostages, promising immunity from punishment and even rewards. Tolland had answered with defiant obscenities.

Sanger tried to ease his throbbing stomach muscles by massaging them with both hands, and thought about Tolland. He even found himself trying to think of something he could do about Tolland. But what could he do, even if somehow he could find the courage to try? And he knew he'd never face the moment of action. That was the job of men like the deputy, men who knew and accepted the perils they faced. The State had no right to send Frank Sanger into danger. He was no fighter. He was a man who wanted to get along with people and tried to keep away from those he couldn't get along with. He took his work and his pleasures quietly, he asked nothing better than a steady job and maybe someday to meet a steady, quiet girl whom he could marry and settle down with and have a couple of nice kids and save a little money to send 'em to college.

Instead, he lay here bruised and brutalized, his life at the mercy of a human tiger. It wasn't fair. Frank Sanger was very sorry for himself.

The clanking was getting louder.

In the darkness Tolland spoke, on a note of sharp alarm, "Rukey! It's a tank! They got a tank out there!"

Sanger's stomach turned over. A tank! That could only mean the warden meant to blow this building apart with gunfire.

And him with it.

Rukey was cursing the warden, his voice a wire-thin edge of panic.

"It's another bluff." rumbled Tolland. "He's playin' his last card."

"What if it ain't no bluff?" Rukey said.

"Nuts," snapped Tolland. "Think he'd kill his own dep'ty? Look, Rukey. You git up above an' tell the other guys to keep their shirts on. We can't have 'em goin' haywire now."

Rukey mumbled something and went off, his feet dragging on the concrete floor of the corridor. Sanger knew there were two convicts upstairs who'd been stationed to watch at the windows, front and back, against any unexpected move by the guards and the State Highway Patrolmen who'd joined them. These two men had agreed to throw in with Tolland and had been let out of their cells. The other six "isolation stiffs" had refused to take part and were still locked up, with a tin cup of water each and nothing to eat. The four men in the solitary cells down below were getting the same deal. "Finks—let 'em rot there," Tolland had decreed.

Now Tolland was walking across the office. At the corridor door, he spoke softly: "Kid, you there?"

"Yeah," the kid's voice answered.

"C'mere, an' don't make no noise about it. You'n me gotta li'l business to talk over."

The clanking stopped. Sanger was glad because now he could hear better. Something told him he must hear what Tolland was going to say next.

"Come over here by the winda," Tolland told the kid. "See that tank outside?"

"Think I'm blind?" snapped the kid. "I useta run one o' them things 'fore they kicked me outa the Army."

"Yeah," said Tolland. "So ya told me before. And ya know I was in the tanks too, back in th' war. Ya got any ideas?"

Before the kid could answer, the loud-speaker out in the yard gave a preliminary squawk and Warden Terhune's harsh accents battered at Sanger's eardrums:

"You men in there! Look out the window. That's a tank you're looking at. You'll note it has a gun trained on the building you're hiding in. That gun is loaded with a high-explosive shell. Two or three of those shells will blast those brick walls of yours into a heap of rubble —with you underneath. Now then

—I want my deputy warden, I want Keeper Gustafson, I want Mr. Sanger. I want 'em out here safe and sound. If they're still alive. If not, then there's no reason why you rats in there should live any longer either. You've got ten minutes to release those three men. After that I'll assume they're dead and I'll deal with you accordingly."

Sanger thought, in ten minutes I'm going to be dead. Chill sweat poured from him. The warden began repeating his announcement again "You men in there! . . ." Sanger crawled, using the noise of the loudspeaker to cover the faint sounds of his inch-worm progress. He crawled along the foot of the wall, behind the desk, over the deputy's legs, hardly daring to breathe but determined to get closer where he could hear what Tolland was cooking up. Fear of what Tolland would do to him if he caught him crawling was overlaid by the greater fear that it was less than ten minutes now . . .

"Tolland!" The warden's voice crackled. "Time is running out!" The loudspeaker stopped as Sanger reached the front corner next to the window; he heard the kid mutter:

"Jeez! Ya think he means that?"

"Nah!" muttered Tolland. "But he's smart. Rukey might buy it, an' them other stiffs. He's tryin' t' set 'em against me. We gotta make a quick move. Look, kid, when you got pinched it was in the papers you was the pistol champ of your division. That right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Never mind but. An' keep yer voice down. Think you c'd shoot out them two flood-lights—bing-bing—jus' like that, two quick snapshots?"

"Sure," the kid whispered.

"That there's an M-24. I checked out on them things: 'sistant gunner. Can you drive it?"

"Sure!" An excitment crept into the kid's voice.

"Okay. Engine's still runnin'. Only two men in the tank, one in th' turret, other in th' driver's seat. S'more tin soldiers was ridin' on top—they went inside the mess hall with the State cops. So here's what we do—shut up now, lemme talk, we ain't got time to argue. I turn around an' shut my eyes fer a coupla minutes. Then I kin see in the dark pretty good. I give ya the word. You shoot out them flood-lights. Then you grab my belt an' out we go an' git us that tank!"

"But they'll open up on us soon's we bust out the door."

"They won't be able to see nothin' real good for two-three minutes after them floodlights go out," cut in Tolland, his whisper sharply insistent. "Neither'll you, 'cause you gotta look at them lights to hit 'em. But I'll be able to see. I'll steer ya to the tank, then we bump off them tin soldiers 'n' take her over. By that time you'll be seein' okay. We run her down to the side gate, ram

her through, go on downtown and blast open the bank. Then we grab a car an' hit the pike with enough dough so's we kin lay low fer a year."

"Kee-rist!" choked the kid. "Whatta a caper! But they'll tear the country wide open lookin' fer us."

"That's the best part of it," gloated Tolland. "Soon's we git in that turret we're gonna slap a coupla shells inta this goddam buildin'. That'll make enough excitement t' cover us while we're scrammin' out the gate, 'n' besides it might take the warden quite a while t' sort the heads 'n' legs 'n' guts outa the brickdust 'n' even then they mightn't be too sure who's missin'. Could be we get a coupla days' start before the cops kin be dead certain who they're lookin' fer. What's more, I'll be even wit' that bastard of a dep'ty an' I'll teach Rukey what comes of figgerin' on double-crossin' me—which he's up there doin' right now, the rat."

"Kee-rist!" muttered the kid again, and this time there was awe-struck admiration in his tone.

"Okay," came Tolland's whisper on a note of finality. "I'm shuttin' my eyes now. Stand by."

Sanger stopped breathing completely. If they heard him, if they knew he'd overheard them . . . He shuddered. Then he remembered he'd be cold meat anyway in a matter of minutes. Or shredded meat. When the shells came.

He stopped shuddering. Suddenly he was thinking out quite coldly and clearly how he might manage to survive. They were going out the door. That meant the outside door—the barred door in front, through which Sanger had entered this accursed building. Could he get there first? The very thought of trying to beat Tiger Tolland to that door was suicide. No. That wouldn't do.

But after Tolland and the kid were out? Couldn't he follow them? And once out, couldn't he run for safety to the guards in the mess hall?

He turned the idea over in his mind, a mind concentrated on the one problem that seemed important at that moment—the personal survival of Frank Sanger.

"Let her go, kid," came Tolland's hoarse, whispered command.

Two pistol shots barked instantly. Outside, glass and metal clattered. Sanger lifted his face from the crook of his elbow and stared into black darkness. Not till then did he realize that he, like Tolland, had been guarding his eyes. Stealthy feet were racing across the floor. Sanger slipped off his shoes. From the head of the stairs Rukey's voice yelled, "What gives down there?"

Sanger, trying to get around the desk to the corridor door, stumbled over the deputy's body again. He caught the edge of the desk to keep from falling.

In the darkness the deputy's voice spoke softly, "Stop that bastard,

Sanger. Up to you. 'Member, he can't take it—"

Stop, hell, said the fear that clutched at Sanger's heart. *Just let me out of here.*

He was at the corridor door now. Outside, somebody was shooting, several somebodies. He could hear bullets thud against the brick walls. The shooting was wild and blind, as Tolland had said, but aimed in the direction of the door.

A gray rectangle appeared. The blanket over the door was being lifted. A bushy head was silhouetted there.

"C'mon, kid," rasped Tolland's impatient whisper.

"Right behind ya," said the kid's voice.

Sanger slid round the wall toward the door. He could hear Rukey starting down the stairs. A flashlight ray probed the dark corridor. Rukey must have Gustafson's torch.

Sanger had almost reached the door. He sensed that the kid was only a foot or two ahead of him.

"Grab my belt, kid," Tolland muttered again, impatient.

Something zipped through the door and spattered against the wall. Sanger heard a thump and a gasp, just inside the doorway and the kid, directly in front of Sanger swayed toward him—the kid's face twisted by the shocked surprise of the bullet that had drilled that neat black hole just above his right eye. Sanger grabbed at the collapsing body, got one hand under an armpit, eased the inert flesh to the floor. Metal clattered.

"Grab my belt," snarled Tolland. "Let's go!"

Sanger, in blind panic, came to his feet and grabbed with one hand. Somehow his fingers found and closed on the web belt.

Tolland charged out into the gray shadows of the prison yard, towing Sanger behind him. Bullets whispered in the gloom. Sanger could see a deeper mass of shadow right ahead. The tank. Once Tolland reached that tank—

Red rage exploded suddenly in Sanger's brain. He flung his right leg forward, knocking one of Tolland's plowing feet against the other—a child's trick, remembered from school days, but it served. Tolland tripped, went to one knee. And Sanger hurled himself at the huge shoulders, yelling at the top of his voice:

"Help! Help! I've got Tolland!"

Tolland, taken completely by surprise and off balance, went flat on the gravel, face down. Office-soft as Sanger was, the sheer weight of his body was enough for that. He landed on Tolland's back with both knees, began beating furiously with both hands at the heaving, beast-stinking mass beneath him. Through the red mist of his fury, he heard screams that presently died away into sobbing gasps . . .

Light stabbed at his eyeballs. Somebody was dragging at his

arms. A gruff voice was saying: "Lay off, you don't have to bash his brains out."

The red mist cleared. Sanger sat in the glare of the tank's headlights, staring at the thing he held in his right hand.

It was a gun. What was he doing with a gun? His whirling brain churned up a memory of the dead kid collapsing on the floor, of something that clattered. He must have picked up the kid's gun. He stared at the thing. It dripped. It was covered with blood. His hand was sticky-warm with blood. He licked his lips and the salt taste of spattered blood was on his tongue.

Frank Sanger rolled quietly off the twitching body of Tiger Tolland and lay on the gravel in a dead faint.

Futility

In Tokyo, Mamoru Nishimura, 21, appeared in court on a robbery charge. Testimony disclosed that he threatened a housemaid with a knife and demanded money, ordered her to phone police, surrendered his knife, asked for Sake and got drunk, then waited for almost an hour for police. Under questioning, Nishimura admitted he wanted a year's free board in jail.

"The alleged crime was an obvious fraud," the judge decided. "Case dismissed."

High Frontier

A housewife in Mt. Clemens, Mich., excitedly phoned police and said a boy in a Davy Crockett hat was caught in a tree and couldn't get down. Officers arrived to find a raccoon.

Camouflage Capture

In Philadelphia, Gregory Yaroschuk decided to catch the thief that had been taking bread from a delivery box almost every morning outside his grocery store. He camouflaged himself with a green blanket that blended with a nearby fence of the same color. Armed with a revolver, Yaroschuk jumped out as the thief started taking the bread and nabbed his man. He told police later that he got the idea while watching a detective drama on television.

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Lenore

A Novelette

BY FREDERICK C. DAVIS

HE REMEMBERED the explosion as a blinding sunburst in the night. The force of it had seemed to heave the *Sun Girl* out of the water. Blasting inside the dark cabin below, it had caught him just as he was about to swing down from the cockpit deck. It had lasted no longer than the wink of a flashbulb, but in that split-second it had shattered his whole world.

A blank period had followed—how long, he couldn't know—until

She was like no other woman under the southern sky. And he meant to have her, even at the price of murder.

he had found himself swimming. Not swimming actually, but threshing about, instinctively keeping himself afloat. He had twisted himself around, blinking to clear his stinging eyes as he tried to find Whit's cruiser. It had been riding at anchor, somewhere near, only moments ago; but now it was gone. The Gulf of Mexico was a vast moonlit silence.

He tried to call, his voice sounding hoarse and weak in his own ears. "Whit! Whi-it!"

He heard no answer. There was no other swimmer, no glimmer of a boat's running lights anywhere this side of the black horizon.

"Whi-it!"

There was not even an echo in that great, flat emptiness.

He turned on his back, numbed with shock and almost strengthless. His clothing was a weight. Floating, he managed to pry off his loafers. After resting until he felt equal to it, he began to swim.

A slow-running tide rolled past him toward the distant beach. Between the rise and fall of the swells he could see the shine of the marina in Boca Palma Bay and, nearby, bright pinpoints — the windows of the houses at Belle Loma—among them Lenore's home. He reached toward them with heavy arms and reached again. They were far away —so far, he thought, gulping for breath. So far he could never make it.

But something compelled him to keep on trying even while he realized he hadn't enough strength left to reach the beach. Something inside him. It was a hunger, and it was also a fury, the two mixed together, and their name was Lenore.

He remembered the water, how its black surface had been traced with wavering reflections of the Florida moon, a flickering as intense as the lights he had seen tonight in Lenore's pleading eyes. He remembered its warmth—blood-warm, as warm and soft as Lenore's arms. He had felt a yearning to yield, to sink into the all-enfolding embrace, yet he had fought. He had kept swimming toward the impossible shore because he knew Lenore would be waiting there in all her loveliness, and evilness.

He thought he was imagining the growl of an engine growing louder. Then the reaching beam of a searchlight found him and he heard voices. As he began to go under, hands pulled at him.

He had gladly given himself up to them, and to sleep, the deep sleep of prostration. . .

He had wakened briefly hours ago, had felt of the bandages strapped over half his face, and had slept again. The hospital room was quiet. The window blinds were lowered against the brilliant hot sunlight of the early Florida summer. He lay under a sheet, his eyes closed, aware that all his body needed now was to rest. He was well past all serious danger, physically. But the nearness of dying had been the least

of it. They had saved him from that to face a more dangerous crossing...

He heard a murmur of voices in the hallway. The door opened quietly and closed. Someone came to stand beside his bed.

A chesty voice said, "Feeling stronger now, Webb? . . . Webb? Can you talk a little?"

The man standing there was a two-hundred-pounder with bristling russet hair and a dour, troubled face. Webb Bowers had expected him to be the first to come. Ryan Croft was the county prosecutor. To Webb he scarcely looked the part. Having spent most of the past ten years up north, attending Andover, then Yale, then Harvard Law, and traveling during the summers, Webb hadn't fully readjusted himself to the easy ways of this subtropical climate. Men here, including officers of the law, preferred comfort to formal uniforms or full suits. The prosecutor was wearing a short-sleeved sports shirt, open at the neck and gaudy.

Webb asked, his throat hurting, "Whit . . . Where's Whit?"

Ryan Croft frowned down, puckering his mouth. "We'll get to Whit in a minute. First—"

"Who pulled me out?"

"A couple of men at the marina heard the noise and saw the flash." Croft named two young charter-boat skippers whom Webb knew. "Got to you just in time, too. Bad burn on your right arm, Webb, and on the right side of your face, but they'll heal. Otherwise you're all right. Lucky you weren't hurt worse."

Lucky? Webb's mouth twisted, pulling against a strap of adhesive tape. No, not really lucky. It might have been better—certainly it would have been easier—if he had gone to the bottom with what he had learned.

"You were on the *Sun Girl* with Whit, of course, Webb."

It wasn't a question and Webb was glad to let it go unanswered.

"It's common talk around the marina, how Whit — much as he loved that old boat of his dad's— wasn't too careful about keeping it shipshape. A fuel leak, a spark— that would do it. But considering the circumstances, we have to make as sure as we can what really happened."

"Yes," Webb said almost inaudibly.

"After all, being sheriff, and being real serious about his job. . . Well, Whit was investigating a homicide, a very suspicious shooting he thought, although the rest of us haven't exactly gone along with that. And— well, you were with him, Webb, you know how it happened, and you're the man to tell us the explosion was an accident. If it was."

Webb closed his eyes.

"In fact, you're the only one who can tell us that."

He asked quickly, his eyes still shut, *"The only one?"*

The prosecutor waited a moment

before he said, "No hurry, Webb. Take it easy, boy. Take your time."

He lay tightly still, thinking of Lenore and remembering . . .

2

There was a party that night—only two nights ago?—at the Martin Farquars' home, the occasion being the judge's sixty-fifth birthday.

All the Farquars' neighbors had been included among the guests, of course—Lenore Collister (alone in the absence of her family, and always the first on any list in Webb Bowers' mind), the Dunbars, the Earles, the Greers, the Bowers, the Crofts. All of them. They were a snugly-knit group, these fine people who lived on Belle Loma Point in a colony as upper-crust as any on the Gulf Coast. This was quite a gala affair for them and, in its own way, extra-special for Webb as well.

At a little past eleven o'clock, leaving the music and the dancing, Webb strolled out across the terrace with a well-iced scotch in his hand, looking for Lenore.

The party had reached a free-and-happy stage of small groups laughing together and twosomes wandering off to enjoy convivial moments of their own, or amorous ones. Delia, for example—Delia Earle, the girl Webb had brought—had gone off somewhere. With whom, he didn't particularly care. A cute little morsel of blondeness, Delia, but unimportant to him tonight. She was nice, but just a kid compared with the dark and quietly fiery Lenore. Lenore was something else entirely, something like no other woman under the sparkling southern sky.

Looking across the lawn and the gardens with their exotic plants, Webb realized he was probably being a bit foolish about Lenore. But then, he always had been. When they first became neighbors here on the Point, as teenagers, he had wanted intensely to become one of her fast-stepping gang. But he hadn't fitted in—he'd been too quiet, too reserved in manner to keep up with them. Since coming back from up north, six months ago, Lenore had been friendly enough, but the difference was still there. It was a certain barrier of sophistication—she seemed much more worldly and experienced now, and she thought him a bit too proper, he supposed. But that was just because she didn't know him as well as she should; she didn't realize he'd been around too. It was something he could fix if ever he could get next to her long enough and alone.

The orchestra had begun another samba a minute ago, when there was no Lenore inside—she had disappeared. Webb had hoped he might find her on the terrace. She wasn't here either—which didn't surprise him. She was unpredictable and impulsive—she might be anywhere, and it might be with any man she knew, and she knew many.

Reminding himself of that, he decided this was far enough. He wouldn't make a damned sap of himself by hunting around for her like a moonstruck school kid. So he stayed there, lifting his drink in an ironic toast to Lenore in her absence.

As he did so, he heard it, the dull *boom*—the first hint of the deadliness to come.

He stiffened, gazing around uneasily. Lights were shining in the windows of every house in sight. That was all he could see, the glowing houses and the dark low hill behind them. He didn't know what had caused the bang, or where it had come from. The night was busy with other sounds. There had been a storm far out over the Gulf; a cool wind was rattling the fronds of the cabbage palms and the silvered waves were curling on the beach below with a sound like the constant whispering of taffeta.

He shrugged, dismissing it, and stayed there alone, thinking that this was a good time to remind himself what a fortunate guy he was. Just to be back in this sunny and amiable paradise, back to stay—that in itself was soul-satisfying. To have passed his bar exams with flying colors at the first crack—that was another. Still better, to have become immediately a member of Judge Farquar's law firm, one of the most esteemed in the state, with a junior partnership in the cards . . . Well, what more could he have hoped for? What more? As he asked himself that, he found himself glancing about the moonlit grounds again, reaching for another glimpse of Lenore.

He enjoyed his drink there on the far border of the terrace while the orchestra played and guests wandered about in high-spirited camaraderie. He was in shadow under a shaggy palm and none of them noticed him until Iris Dunbar, coming farther than the others, found him and paused with a puzzled smile. Iris and her husband, married less than a year, had a new turquoise-blue house just across Palmport Boulevard, two minutes' walk away.

"So alone, Webby?" she said lightly. "Me too. Have you seen Neal?"

"Inside, ten or fifteen minutes ago," Webb said.

"That was just before he went home to get a sweater for me." She shivered a little in the cool breeze. Her smooth, lovely shoulders were suntanned to a cocoa-brown. "Funny how husbands, even new ones, get lost sometimes, isn't it?"

She smiled again, to show Webb she was only kidding, then turned back with her pretty skirt swirling to hunt farther for Neal. Nice, Webb thought. Very nice to have it the other way around—to be looked for by a woman so in love with you.

Still there, he heard slow footfalls in the grass. A thin-faced man of thirty moved into the light—Alec Farquar, the judge's only son. Alec

stopped, looking back across the lawn, frowning and smoothing his hair-line mustache.

"Something wrong, Alec? Lose your girl?"

Webb asked it wryly. Alec was a charter member of Lenore's crowd. He was constantly somewhere near her. Webb didn't know whether there had ever been anything serious between them, but if so it had ceased somewhere; now they were more like sister and brother. Alec always made himself part of Lenore's plans and followed her around watchfully, and she always showed a casual acceptance of him.

"What?" Alec said absently. "Oh. No, not that. Didn't bring a girl tonight." He frowned into the moonglow again.

Webb wagged his head. He had known Alec as long as he had anyone else on the Point, but still didn't know him well. No one did, except Lenore. Alec in turn liked nobody, except Lenore. His attitude toward others was either disdainful or challenging. Perhaps this grew out of a simple inferiority complex, because he had disappointed his father by failing to follow the family's traditional profession. He had flunked out of law school. Afterward he had dabbled irresponsibly at one job, then another. At present it was construction—houses, a new development north of Boca Palma Bay, which was reported to have run into financial trouble. All this had made him sullen and contemptuous of others' successes. An unhappy guy, Webb judged, who had everything and nothing. Webb envied him only one thing, his peculiar closeness of Lenore.

"What *is* wrong then, Alec?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I must say I don't like it," Alec said nervously. "Seen 'Nore?"

Webb answered with a short, quiet laugh. "Not lately." So far as he was concerned, Lenore was always somewhere else.

"She spilled a drink on her dress and left to change it, but that was some time ago. She's not at home now. I just went over there, wondering where she's been so long. At least the front door's locked, which is unusual in itself, and nobody answered the bell." Alec said again, "I just don't like it."

Couldn't he be away from Lenore for fifteen minutes, Webb wondered acridly, without fretting like a pet spaniel?

"What really worries me . . . Something strange was going on behind the house." Alec caressed his trace of a mustache again. "Sounded like—well, voices. Breathless sort of, like somebody struggling. So I started around for a look and they must have heard me. It stopped. The back door banged, and then I got a glimpse of some guy sneaking off. Fast—out of sight before I could tell who he was." Alec came up and stood beside him, lit a cigarette.

That sound he had heard. Webb

wondered — had it been a door-slam? He didn't think so, but it might have been. "Did you ring again?"

"Yes, but no answer. Blinds all down, couldn't see in." Alec shrugged. I guess Lenore's able to take care of herself, but . . . Frankly, Neal Dunbar's been giving her a rough time lately."

"Neal? How?"

Alec peered at him. "How do you think? You'd imagine, being married to a delicious dish like Iris, Neal would be satisfied to settle down. But no. He's always been out of his head about Lenore. Begged her to marry him, but she wouldn't, so then he picked up Iris on the rebound. Marriage hasn't changed him a damn bit, not where Lenore's concerned. He's still so crazy hot about her—"

The sound that struck sharply across the lawn, interrupting Alec, was unmistakable. It was the crash of breaking glass. Then came a woman's voice crying out in fear —from Lenore's home.

"Something *is* wrong over there!" Webb blurted.

He started off at a quick walk, Alec hurrying beside him.

The Collister place adjoined the Farquars', with two hundred feet of lawn and garden separating them. They were almost upon it when they heard Lenore's husky voice inside. "No, Neal! Don't! *Neal, don't!*" Then, shaking, the night air, two swift gunshots.

Webb threw himself into a run. The front door stopped him. As Alec had said, it was locked. Alec blurted, "Let me!" and thumped his thin shoulder against it. It held. Webb was already moving again. "In back, Alec!"

He circled the house rapidly with Alec panting along behind him. At the rear he stopped, catching Alec's arm to caution him, then moving slowly among the orange trees toward the French door.

Half the door was standing open several inches. The pane near the latch was shattered and shards glistened in the light on the steps below. They heard a woman's sobs inside, quick and despairing—Lenore. Alec was still behind Webb when his hand reached the knob. He opened the way carefully, not knowing what to expect, and saw, first, the man lying on the floor.

In falling Neal Dunbar had lurched against a chair and toppled it. He lay on his right side, his white coat fallen open, blood coloring his shirt across the chest. A trickle from his mouth had drawn a line diagonally across his sagging chin. One look was enough. Neal Dunbar was dead.

Lenore was supporting herself against the wall beside the mussed bed, the gun hanging loosely in one hand. Her smoky hair was in wild disorder, her dark eyes round with a terrified appeal. Her dress, still wet from the spilled drink, was zipped open, ripped deeper down

the side and pulled off one shoulder. She stared at Webb and her whole body began to shake as if with a violent chill.

"I had to do it, Webb! I had to!"

Sobbing uncontrollably, she stumbled toward him and threw both her arms around his neck. She held him so desperately tightly that his breath stopped. Holding her, he felt her go limp against him. The gun loosened in her fingers and dropped to the floor behind him. Her head rolled on his shoulder and her tears wet his cheek. Then, lifting her gently, feeling the electrical excitement of her closeness, he carried her away from the man she had killed.

3.

This was the master bedroom, adjacent to Lenore's. She lay under a blanket, still shivering, her eyes glazed. Her left hand was clasping one of Webb's as if she felt a panicky need to keep him near her. Her fingers were tight and cold, but their pressure brought him a melting warmth. She had her playmates, plenty of them, but where were they and what good were they to her now? In this crisis she was clinging to Webb.

The portly, dignified man bending over her on the opposite side of the bed, feeling her pulse, was Dr. Greer.

"She'll be all right now. The sedative is taking hold. She'll sleep the night through. I'll stay with her a while longer. I think they want you out there in the living room, Webb."

He rose, gently loosening Lenore's fingers, reluctantly left her.

He turned first to Lenore's bedroom. Neal Dunbar's body, still lying where it had fallen, was covered with a sheet. At sight of the white mound, Webb felt a furious resentment of the dead man. If only he and Alec had reached Lenore sooner. But it was no worse than Neal had deserved. His drunken lustfulness had forced this horror on Lenore. The mauling, the killing, the investigation, the gossip—it would haunt her all her life. She needed every kindness now, every consideration. Webb was determined to do all he could to help her over the worst of it, and the worst of it was just beginning.

A wizened, bald man was standing at the foot of the bed, scribbling in a notebook while he mumbled to himself. He was Willis Birch, Justice of the Peace, acting as coroner.

"Clear enough what happened here, Webb," he said flatly. He lacked technical training for the job and was blandly unaware of his shortcomings, but seemed eager to get his part done as agreeably as possible. "How the rest of it's going to be handled, that's up to those gentlemen in the front room."

"Well, now, Will—" a voice said from outside. "Not entirely."

Webb turned with a start. The French doors had been opened wide. He saw no one until a man stepped into the light. It was Ed Whitman, said to be the youngest sheriff in the state. Webb was sure that Whit had not been called in directly. Probably Justice Birch had notified him, in his excitement after receiving Judge Farquar's telephone message, and Whit had decided on his own to interest himself in the case.

Whitman paused in the doorway, a stocky figure, his hair sun-bleached and unruly, his face and arms brown as saddle leather. "Did you see it done, Webb?" he asked in his straightforward, clear-minded way.

"Almost," Webb said. "I heard Neal breaking into this bedroom, then Lenore's cries and the shots. So did Alec. Self-defense. It can't be anything else. We'll testify to that, if it goes as far as a trial, which seems entirely unnecessary."

"Think so?" Whitman said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "Well, I guess when I jump to conclusions I jump mighty slow."

Webb frowned at that. As long as he had known Ed Whitman, and as close friends as they were, he was seeing for the first time a side of Whit that was strange to him—the official side. Cruising on the Gulf, or fishing in the channel together, or just lolling on the sun-deck and chewing the fat, Whit had always been a congenial and easy-going companion. But this was different. Whit seemed suddenly hard-headed and distant, even unfriendly.

It disturbed Webb, especially because he felt Whit was too young for the job. Whit's father before him had held the office of sheriff for term after term, as a sinecure, and on his death Whit, his chief deputy then, had been elected largely for sentimental reasons, as a sort of earned inheritance. He was a good, honest sheriff, Webb knew, but he seemed to be grasping a chance to throw his weight around here, to mix in where he wasn't needed.

"Who's jumping to conclusions, Whit?" Webb asked with an edge on his voice. "There can't possibly be any doubt about this."

"Well, Webb," Whit drawled, peering levelly with his sun-faded blue eyes, "me, I want to look facts in the face, no matter if somebody's standin' in the way, and no matter how big they are either."

Webb resented the implication that there could be something to hide here. He turned away with an impatient sound and went into the living room.

Three men were talking there. They reminded Webb that the shooting had brought an abrupt end to the judge's party. The orchestra had packed up and the other guests had hurriedly left. Webb had asked Frank Greer, the doctor's son, to take Delia Earle

home. Judge Farquar had remained here with Alec and Ryan Croft, the county prosecutor. They had removed their white jackets and opened their ties. Badly disturbed, they became silent and gazed at Webb as he came in, as if reproaching him for having stayed so long with Lenore.

"Dr. Greer says she'll be able to talk about it in the morning, after she's slept," Webb said. "Is someone with Iris?"

"Stella's with her." Judge Farquar named his wife. "I feel deeply sorry for that poor child. Shameful business, shameful." With obvious distaste, the judge added, "I imagine we already know most of what Lenore will tell us."

Ryan Croft cleared his throat, a troubled sound. "I think so, Martin, judging from what Alec has related. But I'll have to hear Webb's version of it too. You were first on the scene, I understand, Webb?"

The prosecutor's manner was firm, yet almost apologetic. Webb knew him to be a rigorously conscientious man; his reputation as a public official was thoroughly "clean." This homicide among his closest neighbors had put Ryan Croft in a extremely uncomfortable position. He was keenly conscious of the responsibilities of his office, but at the same time he felt caught in a tangle of sympathies for his friends in a time of tragedy. Croft looked so wretched in his dilemma that Webb was glad to be able to clarify the situation beyond any legal doubt.

"I was first in the room, right after the shots were fired," he said. "But I didn't see the beginning of it as Alec did."

Alec felt nervously of his mustache as he spoke. "I've been sorting it over in my mind. I see now just how it started. A few of us were at the bar, over at the party, laughing and sort of jostling around. That's when—"

Alec stopped, scowling across the room with an offended look on his narrow face. Sheriff Ed Whitman had quietly come in. Too youthful and too informal in his slacks and basque shirt, Whit seemed more of an intruder than an official who was entitled to listen in if he chose. He didn't interrupt, but sat on the piano bench without a by-your-leave, showing every intention of hearing it through.

"The County Prosecutor is here," Alec said to him pointedly. "I doubt that he needs any help from you, Whitman."

"Never mind, Alec," Judge Farquar said brusquely. "Go on with it."

His son shrugged, still frowning with resentment of Whitman's intrusion. "We were there at the bar. That was when somebody knocked over Lenore's drink. It spilled on her dress. She said she'd go home and change. So she left, and it was only a minute or two later when Neal spoke to Iris. He said, 'You're

shivering, baby, I'll get something to put over those lovely brown shoulders of yours.' She said, 'Oh no, Neal, don't bother,' but he insisted and hurried off."

Alec paused. "Several others heard also. Well, you all know how the houses are placed here. Taking the shortest way, Neal would cut diagonally across, past the rear of the Collisters'. He didn't go to his own home, though. Obviously he never intended to. That line about getting something to keep Iris warm was just an excuse."

The men were silent a moment, looking into Neal Dunbar's mind. No doubt he had pictured Lenore stripping her dress off, and it had inflamed him and drawn him. Everyone on the Point knew that Lenore's parents were taking a round-the-world cruise, that she would be alone in the house.

"Some of the rest is guesswork, of course, but it all fits into the picture. Neal must have come in here by the front way and latched the door behind him while Lenore was in her bedroom. I can imagine the drunken way he went at her. She must have tried to handle him quietly, and apparently she did manage to push him out the back door, where nobody'd be likely to notice. I've already told you how I almost found them there. Neal was evidently pawing at her and she was trying hard to get loose from him. Then he heard me coming and stopped. That gave Lenore a chance to get back inside and bolt the door, and Neal dodged out of sight. I rang the bell at the back door, but Lenore didn't answer, probably because she thought it was Neal trying to force his way back in."

Dr. Greer had come into the room and was soberly listening.

Judge Farquar asked, "And you meanwhile, Webb?"

Taking it from there, Webb told Croft how he had heard the crash of breaking glass and Lenore's first cry of fear—how he had reached the house in time to hear Lenore's warning and the shots, but too late to stop Neal himself. In his own mind, Webb said, there was not the slightest doubt that Lenore had fired as a last resort, desperately, in self-protection.

"Justifiable," Martin Farquar said as if pronouncing a judgment from the bench. "Perfectly justifiable. Don't you concur, Ryan?"

"Seems to be no question of it, Martin," the county prosecutor answered uneasily, "although it's a bit too early for a final decision. I'll have to hear Lenore's own story, of course. Until then I can't see that there's any more we can do here tonight . . . Lenore can't be left alone here, of course?"

"My wife will stay with her," Dr. Greer said.

The judge drew a deep breath. "Then I think we can all go now."

Ed Whitman had listened to all this with a faint, oddly sour smile.

He was the first to rise. Without speaking he left through the rear of the house. The others picked up their coats and gathered around the doctor. Webb knew he should leave with them, but he felt himself drawn back to Lenore.

She was alone now, lying still in the bed, breathing deeply. Her hair was a lovely cloud on the pillow. Her cheeks were white, her lips a refreshed red. She seemed to sense that Webb was looking down at her. Stirring a little, she lifted her eyelids drowsily. She smiled and reached for him.

"It's going to be all right, Lenore." He sat beside her. "I'll help all I can."

She murmured, "I know you will, Webb." Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I never realized before—how strong you are. I can count on you, Webb; I'm sure I can."

"You can count on me all the way."

"Thank you, Webb." Her other hand crept across his shoulder to the back of his neck. She drew him down to her soft warm lips.

4.

Late the next morning, instead of calling Lenore to the prosecutor's office for questioning, they returned to her home—Ryan Croft, Judge Farquar and Webb Bowers.

Lenore sat in the livingroom, answering them softly, almost in whispers. Last night's ordeal had had a deep affect on her, Webb felt. In her white negligee, with her hair loose and dark against her pale skin, she looked demure, almost childlike.

He listened as she verified Alec's story of Neal's drunken attack, but scarcely heard her words. The shattering experience had brought her closer to him in a warmer intimacy than he had ever hoped to share with her. He had spent a sleepless night, thinking constantly of Lenore in his arms, hungry to feel her there again and again. The vibrant softness of her lips lingered on his like a secret promise.

As she talked her dark eyes turned frequently to his, and each time she faintly answered his reassuring smile. She was telling him she needed him, more than she had ever needed anyone else, and he was fired all over again with a resolve to stop at nothing to protect and keep her.

When the interview ended and the prosecutor turned to the door, she gazed full at Webb. "Come back," her gaze said. "Come back to me soon."

He went out with his pulse hammering, feeling that part of him was staying with her, held there by a magnetic pull he could never resist. Aware of almost nothing but the new wonder of Lenore, he joined the two men beside Ryan Croft's car in the brilliant sunlight.

"Well, Ryan?" Judge Farquar

asked. "The rest of this is largely up to your discretion, of course, but I must say I feel a formal charge would only bring further hardship on her."

The prosecutor gave him a worried frown. "Martin, I'm permitted to make reasonable allowances—my responsibility is to avoid burdening the court if I rightly can—but I ask myself what I would do in such a case if it involved someone other than Lenore, someone I'd never known. You see, I can't honestly let my personal sympathies sway me too much. The law requires an inquest, at least. The evidence and the testimony must determine the verdict. That much is necessary and unavoidable—but frankly, between us, I trust it will go no farther than that."

"I see." Judge Farquar frowned after Croft as the prosecutor got into his car. When he was gone, the judge turned his frown on Webb. "Inquest indeed! He could make a perfunctory thing of it if he wished. Ryan's too damned straitlaced at times, I think. Well, there's no help for it. Webb, Lenore has asked me to represent her, and of course I couldn't refuse. But this is not my kind of thing at all." The judge specialized in estates and civil actions, and had no stomach for criminal actions. "So it's all yours, Webb, if you'll take it."

"If . . .I I was about to ask you to—"

"Good. Do your best to end this nasty mess in a hurry. No shortcuts, mind you, but get her off as best you can."

"I certainly will."

He hadn't expected this. For a moment he was dazed to find Lenore's defense placed entirely in his hands—her future actually. It would make him even more important and necessary to her; it would bring him even closer, unforgettably so. Her other fair-weather friends would fade into the background. He knew immediately what his objective was—to keep the case from going any farther than it must, through the inquest but not beyond. And if he succeeded, Lenore would be forever grateful because he had saved her from a scandalous public trial and all its dangers.

His impulse was to hurry straight back to her, but Judge Farquar had turned toward the house, evidently intending to explain that Webb was her counselor. He let the judge go in alone. He would come back later—but soon, as soon as her eyes had asked.

An urge for immediate action took hold of him. His first move, he decided, must be to see Iris, both as Lenore's attorney to gain information helpful to his case, and as a friend to offer his condolences.

He walked past the rear of the Collister home and crossed Palmport Boulevard to the door of the Dunbar house. His ring was answered by Mrs. Farquar. She told

him solemnly that Iris was on the sundeck. He climbed the stairs and stepped out into the stinging hot sunshine to find Iris in a black strapless swimsuit, sitting cross-legged on a beach rug. She was not alone. Ed Whitman was reclining in a canvas chair beside her.

Resenting Whit's presence—this was more of his uncalled-for meddling, Webb thought—he said the expected things to Iris and she gave him her quiet answers. She seemed neither teary nor dazed with grief; instead, her pretty face was tight with a deep-lying anger.

"Judge Farquar has turned Lenore's case over to me," Webb said, and at once he saw that oddly cynical smile on Whit's mouth again. "I thought I ought to tell you right away, Iris. After all, we're all old friends. Do you feel you can talk about it a little?"

Iris startled him; she flared up. "You bet I can talk about it! I'll talk plenty. I know the rotten things they're saying about Neal, and it's a big lie. You've got another think coming, Webb Bowers, if you imagine you can whitewash Lenore by smearing Neal."

It jarred him. He had expected to find a woman crushed with sorrow. Instead, he found himself coping with a fighting hothead. It took him a moment to regain his balance, while Whit sourly smiled.

"Naturally you're upset, Iris, that's easily understandable. But let's try to be reasonable and—"

"Yes, let's," Iris cut in, her green eyes flashing indignantly. "But you've been away, Webb; you don't know what the situation here really was. And you don't know Lenore. You seem to think she was a tender little orange blossom fighting for her honor." Iris smiled bitterly. "Well, you could hardly be more wrong."

Ed Whitman spoke in a drawl. "That's true, Webb. As sheriff, I know about such things. For years now Lenore has been bouncin' in and out of one scrape after another. Gamblin' raids, car smash-ups, tearin' all-night parties, nude bathin', playin' around with other women's husbands—all that and more. And worse. Includin' another shootin'."

Webb choked down an incredulous sound.

"Guess that's news to you, Webb. It was only last year. Guy over in Whitewater. Married man. She made a hot play for him and he was smart enough to know she's trouble on the hoof. Very tasty, mind you, and I guess irresistible to some men, but still loaded with hell. So just before she got this fella in too deep, he called it no dice. She flew into a rage and let go at him with a twenty-two pistol. Lucky for her, she was too tight to shoot straight that time; she only nicked him. Of course, like all the other jams she's been in, it was hushed up by her lovin' family."

Webb took it as an unmerited sneer. He had heard that the Col-

listers had been reached at Cairo and that, abandoning their cruise, they were flying back to stand by their daughter. He could not believe they had condoned any such long-range wickedness on Lenore's part. He remembered how childlike and sweet she had looked this morning, and how trustingly she was relying on him, and he assured himself that Whit was exaggerating wildly.

"The Collisters have a lot of weight in this county, and a lot of dough," Whit was adding, "and they've needed plenty of both to keep coverin' up for their darlin' child. But this time they might not have quite enough."

"Knock it off, Whit," Webb said sharply. "As a responsible official, you should know better than to repeat cheap talk." Webb thought that Whit, living outside the exclusive Belle Loma colony, was letting his envy run away with him. "Even if it were true, which seems damned unlikely to me, it would have no bearing legally on what happened last night. Let's stick to the facts in *this* case, shall we?"

"That's just the way I'd like to see it through, Webb," Whit said quietly. "Stickin' to the facts all the way, if you're willin' to see 'em."

"Willing? That's why I'm here, to get them straight." Webb dropped his frown to Iris. "All right. As I understand it, this was the way it happened. A drink was spilled on Lenore's dress and she went home to change. Then, a minute later, knowing he could catch her there alone, Neal made an excuse and went after her. He—"

'Not a bit of it!" Iris lifted herself to her bare feet and faced him, a tidy little figure, all milk-and-chocolate, but bristling as only an aroused woman can bristle.

"It wasn't that way at all. I know. I was there. It was just the reverse. The sweater wasn't Neal's suggestion, it was mine. I asked him to get it for me. That came first. He left while Lenore was still there—and *then,* a little later, her drink was knocked over. I saw it—*she* did it herself. It was no accident, Webb Bowers."

He told himself Iris was confused, or else she was deliberately distorting it in order to shield her shamefully dead husband. After all, he reminded himself, he had all but eye-witnessed the very crux of it.

"Lenore began chasing Neal several years ago. He knew the kind she is and he wanted no part of her. But she wouldn't let him alone. After he married me, she went after him all the harder. The old, old business of the woman scorned. She was burned, her vanity was wounded because he'd chosen me instead. She was trying to break up our marriage and get him back from me. She couldn't do it, but she did make life miserable for Neal, so much so that he was desperate to get out of her reach. He'd

made up his mind about that." Iris narrowed her eyes again. "Did you know that, Webb? That Neal and I were planning to leave the Point for good, right away, next week?"

Webb echoed, "Leave?"

"Our home, our friends, everything we like so much, just to get away from Lenore's constant trouble-making. Neal's job had kept him here, but he had been trying to find a new one, and finally he did—California, as far away as he could go. He got the news just yesterday afternoon; the position was his, come as soon as possible. It got noised around at the party last night. You know what it meant to Lenore? She was losing her last chance to show me up, she was losing Neal forever—and it was his choice. That's what brought it to a head. This was a final slap in the face for Lenore the man-eater, who couldn't take it without one last try."

Webb stared at her, his face hot, refusing to accept this obviously prejudiced judgment of Lenore.

Whitman's voice drawled again. "To get back to it, Webb . . . Neal left the Farquars' *first;* then Lenore went out looking for him. Neal actually did come here to this house, you know. He actually got Iris's sweater for her."

Webb asked skeptically, "How can you be so damned sure of that?"

It was Iris who answered, completely sure of herself. "I'll tell you why. I kept that sweater in a cedar closet in our bedroom upstairs. That's where I'd left it. But when I looked for it this morning it wasn't there. Instead, I found it in the hall closet downstairs."

Webb shrugged. It might be an oversight of some kind, a detail that proved nothing.

"I think Lenore was waiting outside for Neal to come past her house," Iris said. "I think she hooked him, pulled him in and went to work on him. No, I don't think this, I *know* it. And Neal, being such a fine sort, wanting to avoid an embarrassing scene, must have tried nicely to bring her to her senses and—" Iris stopped with a little groan. "The way you're looking at me, Webb! You don't believe a word I'm saying." She dropped back to the rug, a curl of sleek brown. "Oh, what's the use, Whit? We're bucking too much — too much money, too much power, too much blindness."

Whit stood. "I'm not so sure of that, Iris. Leastways, I'm not about to quit buckin'. Not yet." His faded blue eyes leveled at Webb. "You said you want the truth. Well, there's a couple of plain facts you might think about. For instance, that broken glass. The pieces didn't fall *inside* the room, as they would have done if the glass had been hit from the outside. Instead, the pieces were all *outside,* on the steps. Did you notice that, Webb?"

"I heard Neal forcing his way

into that room," Webb said flatly.

"Did you? Or was it Lenore you heard, Lenore settin' the stage for your special benefit." Whit put on his cynical smile. "Another thing, Webb. How many shots did you hear?"

"Two."

"Only one bullet hit Neal. Nothin' else in the room was hit. Where do you figure that second bullet landed?"

"Easy," Webb said at once. "Out the open door." Webb clenched his fist, impelled to drive it into Whit's face; but he warned himself off. Was this the story Iris intended to tell on the witness stand? If so, he needed to keep a cool head. And it would be worse than useless to argue it out here, with Whit stubbornly backing her up. He forced his hand open and without speaking turned away.

He was outside the front door before he became aware that Whit had followed him. He turned, his face hardened, and Whit faced him soberly.

"One more minute, Webb. You've gone overboard. You'll only get yourself hurt. *They* won't care, though. All they want is to use you to pull their chestnuts out of the fire."

"That's enough, Whit."

"Not quite. You're headin' into worse than you're bargainin' for—you'd better see that before it's too late. There's one more detail that might help to open your eyes. About Iris' sweater. She didn't notice it, but I did—a small spot of blood. Think of it as Neal's blood, and what does that tell you?"

"It tells me you're twisting the evidence to suit your own purposes."

"*I* am?" Whit peered at him unbelievingly. "Look, Webb, I've got to tell you why I see this as I do. The way I work at it, the law isn't just for crackin' down on the little guys, the poor people. It's meant for big, rich ones too. They're not above it. They can't be, not if it's real justice we want. And that's the only kind worth livin' with."

"Nothing personal in that, of course," Webb said acridly.

Whit smiled. "Nothin' personal at all. No hard feelin's, Webb. We're good friends. Look, I'm goin' out on the *Sun Girl* again tonight. How about comin' along? We'll just forget all this for a few hours, like old times."

Whit liked to spend the night in his cruiser. Webb had joined him on five or six occasions since coming home. He'd loved it on the water, with the *Sun Girl* riding at anchor in the still moonlight. But it would not be the same again. Whit's prejudiced obstinacy had strained their friendship.

"No, thanks, Whit. I'm too busy working on an important case."

Whit nodded slowly. "That tells me where you stand. Well, you're goin' to do all right here, Webb. You're more than willin' to play ball

with the right people. You'll make yourself big and heavy just like them some day. Sure, you'll do fine —provided you're careful not to let your self-respect get in your way."

He turned his back and moved away, leaving Webb in a freezing fury.

5.

A memo on his desk told Webb the inquest was set for ten o'clock tomorrow morning.

He paced about his office, shaken by the challenge of Iris and Whit. They were a threat; together they might manage to turn the whole case inside out. Their testimony, if it was believed, was all too likely to mean a formal charge against Lenore, and a trial. And in turn a trial could bring a conviction, not for first degree murder, but possibly for second degree, or at least manslaughter. Prison for Lenore! The thought stirred panic in Webb. He swore he could never let it go as far as that. His whole world was revolving around Lenore now. He might lose it all unless he found a way of stopping the case short at the inquest.

How? The necessity of it pressed on him—he had so little time—but what could he do?

There were only three witnesses in Lenore's behalf—Lenore herself, Alec and Webb. The jury would have heard the exaggerated gossip about Lenore's escapades; they would not easily see her as entirely blameless. They might expect Alec, the devoted hanger-on, to lie for her. As the defense attorney, Webb would naturally handle his own testimony with a view to winning. He squirmed, realizing it was too weak a setup. He needed another witness, an impressive one. His case would be far stronger if he could find somebody who had actually seen Neal Dunbar breaking into Lenore's bedroom.

Was there such a person? It did not seem likely. Iris? He frowned remembering how she came out of the night asking had he seen Neal . . .

Lenore had friends, and so had Webb. One of them might be persuaded, for Lenore's sake, to stretch the truth a bit—as surely as Iris and Whit were stretching it the other way—and tell that decisive story. It would be no more than a report of what Webb believed had actually happened. But it must be made holeproof. County Prosecutor Croft, having a set picture already in his mind, would probably accept it without question. But Croft could get rough, if under pressure the witness cracked.

A gamble, yes, actually the worst risk he could run professionally; but if he didn't take it he might lose Lenore. The thought of Lenore was like alcohol in his veins—no effort of his mind could get it out; it left him incapable of cool reasoning. The question was no longer

how, but who—who would do it for Lenore. Who could be relied upon to stretch what he was absolutely sure was the truth and to hold onto it under attack? He wished that Lenore hadn't had those "incidents" to be scooped up out of the past. Without those, it would be a cinch.

His constant tight pacing had tired Webb. Coming back to himself, he stared in atonishment at the clock on his desk. It was late. The office was quiet; the whole staff had gone. He sank into his chair and stayed there, thinking of one friend who might serve, then another, and realizing all the while that the hours before the inquest were growing shorter.

Darkness came into the office before he realized it, and still he had not found the safest answer. He pushed himself to his feet and went out to his car. He was getting into it when a coupe swung to the curb behind it with a short beep of its horn. A girl left it and hurried to him. She was the little blonde he had taken to the Farquars' party last night, Delia Earle.

At once she struck him as a possibility. She liked him, and liked Lenore too. She would do it, he thought, once he'd made her understand.

Delia was breathless. "Webb, I've something to tell you. Didn't have a chance sooner—had to go to Orlando today with daddy and we just got back. It's about something I happened to see last night."

Something she'd happened to see! He asked hopefully, "You mean Neal?"

"Neal? No, not Neal. It was Whit."

His hopes collapsed, but he held on. "What about Whit?"

"He was there in his car last night, parked on Palmport Boulevard, almost in front of the Dunbar house, and behind the Collisters'."

He stared at her in confusion. This was something Whit had carefully avoided mentioning. "Whit was *there?*"

"Oh, you know how Whit is, Webby. He often does that—sees a party going on, parks and keeps an eye on the departing guests. If he spots a driver who's had too much to drink, he takes him home. Public service, he says, prevents accidents. I guess that's why he was watching from near the Dunbar place. But the important thing, Webby, is that he may have seen something of what happened."

"Delia, are you sure of this?"

"Of course I'm sure. I was wandering around the grounds with Frank Greer, helping him get some air. Although Frank wasn't seeing too well, *I* was. In fact, when I first spotted Whit he was going back to his car from the direction of Lenore's house, like he'd been snooping around."

Why had Whit held out this piece of information? "Yes, go on! What else did you see?"

"But that's all, Webby. It's all over town now that you're Lenore's lawyer, and I just thought you ought to know."

"Thanks, Delia, thanks very much."

He was inside his car and starting off before she turned away. It was only four miles from the town of Palmport to Belle Loma Point. He made it to the door of the Collister home in six minutes. Lenore's convertible was sitting in the carporte, with Alec's open Jaguar behind it. He rapped once, sharply, and pushed in.

Lenore and Alec were not in the living room, but they came in immediately from the jalousie-enclosed porch, looking, Webb thought fleetingly, a little guilty. He had no time to wonder why that was. Whit had suddenly become dangerous, doubly dangerous because he was playing his cards close to the chest.

"Alec, when you were here last night—outside, before it happened—did you happen to see Whit?"

"Whit? Why do you ask?"

"He was parked on the boulevard, almost behind this place. He prowled around. He may have seen something, and if he did, he's saving it to spring at the inquest tomorrow."

The warning did not appear to disturb them. Alec smoothed his mustache and shrugged.

"If there's anything you haven't told me, Lenore," Webb said earnestly, "I've got to know it now."

Lenore answered with a puzzled smile. "But of course there isn't anything, Webb darling. You know there couldn't be; you were with me only a few seconds afterward."

"But Whit *does* know something," he insisted. "I'm sure of it, something he hasn't given to Ryan Croft. If there's anything Whit can hit you with, Lenore, tell me now."

She gazed at Alec, her moist red lips pursed, and Alec shrugged again.

"Did you already know this?" Webb asked. "Did you happen to spot Whit snooping around out there last night?"

"Look here, Webb, you're worked up about nothing," Alec said. "You already know exactly how it happened, so there's nothing to fear from Whit. Forget him."

Webb felt as if he had tried to grapple with a ghost. He had been so certain that Whit was somehow a threat of disaster, yet his anxiety had failed to touch Lenore. What could it mean except that she had nothing to fear? What could Webb think now, except that Lenore felt secure in the truth, and that Whit's snooping and arguments and "evidence" meant nothing?

"Webb—" Lenore lifted her cool fingers to his face. "Alec and I are about to go out on my boat with a big thermos of martinis. Please stop worrying and join us, Webb."

The temptation to go with her was powerful. It was only the

thought of the inquest tomorrow morning that caused him to shake his head. "I'd like nothing better," he said, Lenore's hand in his, "but I've got work to do. Tomorrow night? We'll have something to celebrate then."

"Tomorrow night. It's a date." Lenore made a face at Alec and smiled. "Just you and me, Webb."

Alec grunted. "I can take a hint. Well, we'll buzz along now. Help yourself at the bar before you go. Do you good, boy."

Webb watched them leaving together and felt a twinge of jealousy, until he reminded himself that Alec was little more than a faithful pet. Webb was the man to whom Lenore had willingly entrusted herself.

He went to the bamboo bar on the porch, found a decanter of bourbon and poured a stiff drink. His glass was empty and he was about to refill it when he heard quiet footsteps on the walk. The jalousies were closed. Unable to see out, he listened, frowning. The footsteps turned—furtively, Webb thought—to the rear door. After a moment the chimes bonged.

Webb's taut nerves warned him not to answer. Listening through another long minute, he heard the door opened. Someone came in cautiously, someone who thought the house deserted. The sounds came closer, into the living room. It was a man, Webb surmised; he was pausing to peer around. Moving silently, Webb flattened himself against the wall beside the door.

A voice spoke in the living room. "Anybody home?"

Ed Whitman's voice.

Webb held himself tightly still.

Now Whit moved again, apparently searching for something. When the noises stopped, Webb risked a move of his own. Leaning toward the door, he looked across and found Whit kneeling on the floor, his back turned. Puzzled, Webb watched while Whit pulled up one end of the throw-rug in front of the fireplace. A gratified sound came from Whit's throat. Whit removed an envelope from his pocket, and a penknife, and bent lower. There was a scraping sound. After a minute Whit straightened and Webb drew back out of sight, realizing with his pulse quickening that Whit had found something.

As Whit turned away, to leave the house the way he had come, Webb smiled to himself. This act on Whit's part was one the law would not condone. Evidence obtained in this manner, without a search warrant, was not admissible in court. Unknown to Whit, Webb was forewarned. He could and would fight to exclude it, and he was certain to score.

Webb waited until he heard Whit's car pulling away on the boulevard. Going to the fireplace, he folded the rug over as Whit had done. There was nothing on the floor; it was clean, waxed to a shine.

What had Whit's actions meant, then?

Tires sounded on the gravel road in front. He crossed to a window, looked out through the side of the blind. Had Whit come back? Or Lenore changed her mind?

The car was not a new model. The door opened and he recognized Lenore's maid. The woman had a little red satchel in her hand, returning to duty from her day and night off. Someone had driven her by, for the car now took off again. She was almost at the door...

Webb moved toward the back, walked swiftly and silently out and around to his car. He wondered whether Whit had seen his car, but that was a secondary consideration now. The other—more important—thing kept nagging at his mind, trying to make sense, trying to adjust itself.

He saw Whit's back as he'd hunched there, heard Whit's soft mutter of gratification. Whit had found something. What?

Webb reached his car and sat there, going over it again. All of it, from the breaking glass to Neal lying there with blood running from him to the wonder of Lenore in his arms. God!, the feel of her arms around him—and her lips. Tomorrow night. . . .

He switched on the ignition. The cool evening air felt good against his face. Tomorrow. . . . Why hadn't he gone tonight? All the details must be run through again, once more, with her. The missing something now nagging him might then be resolved. Also it was best to caution her not to have too many of those martinis. He was not surprised that his car was pointed toward the sea.

He had feared he would be too late, that the *Mermaid* might already have put out. But he was in time; Lenore's boat was still moored at its dock.

Webb ran along the pier toward it, then slowed, puzzled. There was no one on deck in the *Mermaid*—it was dark.

Looking along the line of boats, Webb saw the *Sun Girl,* the old cruiser that had formerly been Whit's father's. Whit was aboard, making ready to cast off. It was Whit's custom to run out beyond the sandbars and anchor there in shallow water; he would have a solitary nightcap and soon turn in for the night, to be rocked to slumber by the slow, even swells. Tonight, apparently, he could sleep well satisfied that he was about to put his name into big headlines by cracking the Dunbar homicide case wide open, single-handed. Tomorrow he would put back early, all too eager to testify at the inquest—maybe to rip Lenore bodily out of Webb's life and dreams.

Webb's anxious eyes turned back. A motion on the *Mermaid* had surprised him. Alec had come on deck from the cabin, no doubt leaving Lenore below. He was

whipping the lines off the piles when Webb called, "Alec, wait!"

Alec stared at him, scowling, as Webb dropped from the pier. "What's on your mind, Webb?"

"Lenore—?"

"She's below. Look, Webb, Lenore invited you, I know, but—"

"Hold it, Alec. We've got to talk."

"Hold it, hell. We're putting out right now. Whatever you've got to say, save it."

"No." Let Lenore go out of his reach now? He couldn't possibly, not for so long as an hour. "This can't wait."

Lenore had heard them. She called delightedly from the cabin. "Webb, is that you? Why, how nice! Come below, Webb."

Alec growled in his throat, shrugged. He switched on the running-lights and started the engine as Webb swung down the companionway. Lenore was sitting on a bunk, her legs crossed, a half empty cocktail glass in her hand. By removing the skirt of her dress she had converted it to a play suit. The only light was a rippling on the ceiling, the lights of the marina reflecting through the ports.

"Webb, darling," she said quietly. "Sit here beside me?"

He sat close at her side, gazing at her in a turmoil of uncertainty and yearning.

"Share it with me, Webb," she invited, offering the glass. He took it, put it to one side.

The *Mermaid* was under way, already veering out of the marina. Almost at once it swung again, toward the north. Alec had chosen the inshore channel. Webb heard another engine and knew it was the *Sun Girl*. Webb's old boat, churning along in their wake, would soon bear southwest, away from them and toward the open gulf.

"We have so much to share now, darling," Lenore said softly.

Her hand passed over his, stole up his arm and gently pulled him down to her. She lay back against the cushions. He had her lips for a long moment. Then with an effort he took them away.

"Lenore, listen. It's very important—"

"Only we are important, Webb." Her eyes were opened wide into his. Her head was cocked ever so slightly, her red parted lips were an invitation.

Maybe it was the cock of her head, or the lips—red like blood. Maybe both. But Webb had it. Now with blinding clarity he saw what had been nagging at him.

He saw Neal lying dead, the trickle of blood from Neal's mouth, a long red mark going diagonally across the chin, *but not downward.* Those few drops of blood could not have traced that line slightly upward across Neal's chin in defiance of gravity.

Webb was certain that Whit's alert eyes had caught the detail which he, Webb, had only half-

caught. *That's* why Whit had come back to prowl Lenore's house. Because he doubted that Neal had died in the bedroom. He'd found where Neal had died. In front of the fireplace?

Yes! Realization struck through Webb's mind like a deafening clash of brass cymbals. The floor was shiny, waxed—too shiny, too waxed. If he'd looked at the underside of the rug, as he might have done if the maid hadn't arrived, what would he have found? Blood? Dry, dead, congealed blood? . . . He could hear the scrape of Whit's knife, and suddenly Webb feared what he knew he'd been fearing all along. That he'd lose Lenore whom he'd just found. Lenore who—

"Darling," she was saying, "you're a million moons away."

"Lenore, listen. I believe I know now what happened, what *really* happened. Do you understand?"

She stiffened a little, a pleading in her eyes, and he was bitterly thankful that she faced it at once without resorting to futile denials.

"Neal did go home, and he was on his way back with Iris's sweater. You were waiting for Neal outside your house. Somehow you got him inside and—" He shrank from putting into words what she had done next. "I heard the first shot, the one that must have killed him there in the living room. Good Lord, Lenore, don't you realize Whit probably heard it too?"

"But Webb, I—I'm not afraid. Not with you helping me, darling."

"But Whit *knows*. He's going to spring it on you at the inquest tomorrow. He may have seen something too. Alec was in the house with you, helping you to arrange it—carrying Neal's body into the bedroom, planning all the rest. Alec took the sweater back to the Dunbar place and left it there, then hurried over to the Farquars'. Whit may have seen him then. He was in the area."

She was still strangely unafraid. She put his hands under her head. "Don't worry so much, Webb. Whit can't take me away from you. Not now, darling. Because we won't let him."

Her composure bewildered Webb. "You don't seem to understand how serious it is, Lenore! Whit's on to it, I tell you, all of it. He may even know how Alec hooked me into it as a witness."

Lenore murmured, "Webb, I'm so glad it was you."

In a crazy way he was also glad. Nothing else could have brought him so desperately close to this woman—so close in an intimacy of guilt.

But how save her? How save them both?

They could keep this boat going, of course, and never return. Be together until finally . . . It would mean the end of his career, but he'd been waiting so long for her it might be worth it. He said,

"You had to do it. Kill Neal. The livingroom or bedroom—he tried to take you and you killed him. The planning and scheming, with Alec, came afterward." He needed a scrap to cling to, something . . . anything . . . Lenore had faked those screams. She had also faked the timing of the shooting by firing out the open door when she heard Webb and Alec running close. Her torn dress and panicky sobbing had all been part of a cunningly staged scene. But that was to make Neal absolutely in the wrong, and help her avoid any dangerous involvement with the law. . . .

"Webb, we've been so long finding each other. Nothing must ever take us apart now, darling, and nothing ever will."

Again her supreme self-confidence left him dazed. How could she feel so certain of it when he saw himself facing an impossible task? Tomorrow, at the inquest, he must defend her knowing she was not innocent.

The *Mermaid* listed in a sharp turn and dizziness overswept Webb. What was he thinking of? This was insanity. He was making himself an accessory. It was his responsibility as a lawyer and an honorable man to bring up the truth, all the truth, not to help bury any of it. But the truth would destroy Lenore and their new world together.

"Webb—" As if she had divined his thoughts she reached out her hands and brought his face close to hers, whispering. "It will be worth it, darling. Think of your wonderful position. You have such a glorious future before you. One day Judge Farquar will give over his whole practice to you. Think of that, Webb, the big money, the prominence, how other lawyers will envy you. It will be heavenly, Webb, having all that and each other too."

"But Whit *knows!*" Webb blurted. "He's going to hit you with it for all he's worth, and there's no way he can be stopped."

"Webb, darling." Lenore's lips flexed against his as she spoke. "Don't worry about Whit. It's going to be all right. Let's think just about us, Webb—that this is only the beginning for us."

She drew him close, her soft arms imprisoning him. It felt good, so very *good* to be there at last—

A cold wind blew across Webb. He pushed himself up, searching Lenore's face. Her wide, dark eyes stayed on his boldly. *Don't worry about Whit, it's going to be all right.* What had she meant? There had been a strange quality in her voice that now lashed him with sudden alarm.

The *Mermaid*—something about it had changed. The boat was in complete darkness. The ports were dim circles opening into the moonlight. No green-and-red glow was visible through them; the running-lights were no longer burning. The

engine had been throttled down to a murmur. The *Mermaid* was moving silently and stealthily in the water.

Webb heard Lenore rising behind him as he turned toward the companionway. The night beyond was all open space, the gulf a vast moon-traced expanse. Webb saw a single white light off the port bow—the anchor light of another boat gently riding the swells. It too was entirely dark, but he recognized its outline. The *Mermaid* had circled back and was drawing alongside Whit's old cruiser, the *Sun Girl.*

Alec had set the *Mermaid's* wheel to send it creeping steadily closer to Whit's boat. He was a dark figure standing on straddled legs on the cockpit deck. As the *Sun Girl* neared, Alec's hands became busy. He thumbed the wheel of his cigarette lighter. A blue-white flame flickered up and he touched it to something Webb could not clearly see. Then suddenly there was a bright scintillation in the darkness, countless white sparks hissing and flying.

"Alec, what's that?" Webb said sharply. "What are you doing?"

Alec lifted the thing above his head, poising to throw it, and then Webb saw what it was—a stick of dynamite with a short length of burning fuse attached.

"Alec!" Webb lurched toward the companionway, realizing in a burst of panic that Lenore and Alec had planned this together. They had realized, even before Webb had, that Whit on the witness stand could condemn them both. Alec must have filched the explosive from the housing-project contractor's supplies. This was the reason Lenore had shown no fear of Whit's testimony — their intention was to destroy him. Lenore had deliberately held Webb below deck with her alluring promises until Alec could run deadly close to his target. She had drawn Webb so deep into it that once it was done he could never dare breathe the truth without implicating himself in both her murders.

"Alec! . . . Whit!"

Webb felt her clinging to him, desperately. In a fury he struck her down. She fell with a harsh, hateful cry. Even as he pulled himself through the companionway the rod of dynamite flew from Alec's hand.

It twirled end over end, a pinwheel streaming its sparks against the sky. Webb saw it land on the *Sun Girl's* deck and disappear rolling into the cabin.

"Whit!"

Alec whirled on Webb. A swift sidestep saved Webb from a blow that could have dropped him. He smashed his fist into Alec's chin. As Alec toppled he sprang for the rail —with Lenore, up again, bounding after him on her quick bare legs. Before she could reach him, he was over, the water swallowing him.

As he swam he heard the *Mermaid's* engine roar. It was veering

away swiftly, still without lights. Webb knew Alec meant to circle widely again, unseen, before returning to the marina to profess ignorance of what had happened to the *Sun Girl*.

Webb reached up to the low rail. He lifted himself, gasping, and fell onto the deck. Scrambling up, he could see the sparkling of the fuse in the cabin where Whit lay asleep. He sprang toward it—

The explosion spewed its power upward, catching him still on deck. He felt himself hurled bodily into blackness. When the moment of unconsciousness passed, he was threshing dazedly in the water, instinctively keeping himself afloat. The gulf was a limitless, silver-flecked emptiness around him. The *Sun Girl* had vanished.

6.

He lay still in the hospital bed, remembering the deadly viciousness of it, but remembering most vividly the enfolding, scented warmth of Lenore's nearness.

The County Prosecutor spoke again quietly. "Take all the time you need, Webb. Happening just when it did, you know, it's a very serious matter. I don't know yet what to make of it, the sheriff getting killed just when somebody might have wanted to shut him up."

Webb stared up at Ryan Croft. "Whit's dead."

"No trace of him," the prosecutor said. "Nothing left of the *Sun Girl* but splintered wreckage. Several of the boys at the marina had warned Whit about a fuel leak a few days ago, but he didn't seem too concerned about it."

Webb closed his eyes again and stiffly listened.

"For a little while it looked like you were a goner too," Croft said. "You were seen on the pier just before Whit put out, and your car's still parked alongside his, so they figured you'd gone out with him again. Lucky you didn't get the full force of the explosion. It leaves you the only one who can say what really happened."

The only one.

"Had Whit talked to you about —the inquest?"

"He intended to testify. I got the impression he had something pretty important to say. But he didn't tell me what it was."

The only one.

In his mind Webb heard Lenore's voice pleading. *"Think of yourself, your glorious future . . . Judge Farquar giving over his practice to you one day . . . the money, the prominence, the envy of other lawyers. . . . It will be heavenly, Webb, darling, having all that and each other too . . ."* And Alec was the judge's son.

He had only to say, "I was asleep on deck on the *Sun Girl*. I don't know what really happened."

Lenore was whispering to him.

"We've been so long finding each other, darling. Let's think just about us, that this is only the beginning for us."

He had only to say, "Yes, it was an accident," and he could keep the glowing world he had, all the successes to come, and Lenore. And Lenore! "Yes, an accident." That would be the end of it, and the granting of everything he desired.

Croft said, "Webb? You're still badly shocked, I know, but I've got to get it straight."

Webb saw that the prosecutor was gazing at him almost fearfully. A man of conscience, Croft was dreading the answer Webb might give him. It might go far to wreck his own pleasant, long-standing relationship with his old friends and neighbors. Two words, *an accident,* could save him from that disaster, and only Webb could speak them.

"Webb?"

He moved his lips. Another voice came into his mind, one he would never again hear in reality—Whit's. *"You'll do all right here, Webb, playin' ball with the right people. Sure, you'll do fine — provided you're careful not to let your self-respect get in your way."*

Webb felt now as he had felt in the black water last night, swamped with hopelessness, tempted to yield to the warm restfulness of the depths even as he strained against it.

"Well, Webb?" Croft said impatiently. "Why don't you tell me? You've nothing to hide, have you?"

We've been so long finding each other, darling. . . .

Careful not to let your self-respect get in your way. . . .

Webb said quietly, "No, there's nothing to hide. Not any more. The way Lenore killed Neal — it wasn't self-defense. He didn't attack her. Just the reverse. It was deadly vanity, sheer female malevolence."

Croft was round-eyed, shaken. "Good Lord, Webb, do you realize what you're saying?"

"Last night, out on the gulf was not an accident. It was deliberate murder done by Lenore and Alec together. Realize what I'm saying? Yes. This isn't the defense attorney speaking. You're listening to your chief witness for the prosecution."

7.

When Ryan Croft returned, Webb was on his feet and dressed, ready to leave the hospital. The prosecutor's face was haggard with strain, yet there was a buoyant light in his eyes.

"There's hell to pay, Webb. But no matter, I'm holding Lenore and Alec both for first-degree murder. They deny it, of course, but if you'll stick to the truth, as I know you will, I'll make that charge stick even if it means my finish here."

"It will mean exactly that for you," Webb said. "And for me too."

"Well, let's not worry too soon. Who knows, the voters may want

to return an honest prosecutor to office. As for you—the attorney general came down from Tallahassee. Wants to see you. There's a top place on his staff for a good man like you, he says. I'd take it if I were you, Webb—you'll do very nicely for yourself there."

Whit would have slapped his back on that and wished him well. He was smiling when he went out with Croft and turned toward the court house. The hot, clean sunshine seemed already to be burning out of him the evilness that was Lenore.

Right in Line

Violet Rake, owner of the Fly Inn at Plainwell, Mich. was given a suspended $100 fine and placed on a year's probation. She was accused by a state health inspector of permitting too many flies in her restaurant.

Motor Mystery

A citizen in Nashville, Tenn., reported that his 1941 automobile had been stolen. "But I can't understand how it was taken," he told officers. "The motor was in such bad condition that it wouldn't run."

Prepared

The burglar who ransacked Donald L. Miller's home in Pasadena, Calif., wanted to be sure of making a fast getaway. Police said that their examination of footprints disclosed that the intruder wore track shoes with spikes.

Fun in the Forest

Miss Ethel Wheeler, a U. S. Forestry Service lookout, noticed some smoke on the slope of Santa Ynez Peak, near Santa Barbara, Calif. She focused her binoculars on a young couple dancing in the nude around a camp fire. The man was playing a violin as his companion made ballet leaps. Service Patrolman Everett Marshall, notified of the situation by Miss Wheeler, hiked up the sloop and arrested the couple. The charge: having an open fire in a prohibited area.

Contest Winner: YOU, detective

No. 9 — THE OBLIGING FIRE

Arthur Bonney
R. F. D. #1,
Mechanic Falls,
Maine.

Rogers nodded. "We already can prove it was arson, Mr. Miller. I think we can also prove who did it—and why."

Green took a short step toward the desk. "But how? I don't see—"

"Take a good look at this picture, Mr. Green." The agent held it out. "Not only does it prove that it was arson, but it also proves quite conclusively who set it. Mr. Green, you would be worse than a crackpot to try to burn up a profit-making business when the small insurance you carry wouldn't even begin to cover your loss, wouldn't you?"

"Mr. Miller," the claims agent went on, "if you were going to set a fire, you'd set it where it would be sure to get a good start, wouldn't you? Besides that, how would you have a key to the office of a private business?"

Rogers made a quick grab for Craig's arm. "Wait a minute, Mr. Craig, you aren't going anywhere, yet. You have access to that office at any time, don't you? You were going to kill two birds with one stone. But you made a big mistake. Why didn't you set the fire out in the warehouse where it really would have done some damage? Were you afraid of losing a good job where you can juggle the accounts and line your own pockets? Or did you merely want to make it look like arson and frame Mr. Miller?"

Rogers got to his feet, still holding Craig's arm. "Probably the police will want to look at those records, Mr. Green. Perhaps Mr. Miller's account isn't the only one that has been padded." He pointed toward the phone.

"You'd better call the police now, Mr. Green."

Challenge for Cause

In Pontiac, Ill. Fred Goodman asked to be excused from jury duty in a drunk driving case. His excuse was perfect. "Your Honor," Goodman said, "I'm the defendant in the case."

Fearful Face

A burglar who entered the apartment of Mrs. Zora Tarpin, 41, of Pasadena, Calif., fled in fright when Mrs. Tarpin sat up in bed. In order to keep out light and street noises, Mrs. Tarpin was wearing ear plugs and a face mask.

There are many ways to get rid of a husband. My way cost only a hundred a week...

Devil Eyes

BY JACK RITCHIE

FRED SAYS that a hundred a week is cheap enough and I guess that's one good way of looking at it.

Not that he could ever prove anything. There's nothing to show I hired him, and I didn't really.

Maybe I should stop paying, but I can't take any chances. You can never tell about those winos. And besides, it's Fay's money anyway.

I try not to let it bother me. Instead, I like to think about the two Jaguars, the forty suits I have

at the Bermuda place alone, and about Fay's money.

And Fay, too, of course.

It was a real good deal, meeting her. I remember I was moody and depressed at the time. Mr. Bronson's detectives had me jumpy, following me that way, and I'd just phoned Mrs. Bronson and told her the whole thing was off.

I was kicking myself for not saving money for times like this when I saw Fay. She had shimmering black hair and devil dark eyes that were a flat invitation. I felt suddenly happier as I made my way through the cocktail crowd.

A real bitch, I thought, as our eyes came closer. But I wasn't complaining.

She arched an eyebrow as she smiled. "Mr. Philip Gillespie, isn't it? I've heard about you somewhere."

I returned the smile. "Some people are shocked. And others interested."

"I'm horrified," she said. "Absolutely shivering."

I touched her arm. "Tell me about it. No harm in that."

"Of course not," she said.

And that's the way it went, right from the start. We both knew what we wanted and we didn't waste time asking questions.

She let me know that her husband, Charley Whittier, was down someplace on the coast of Georgia looking over a new yacht, and that took care of that.

I took her to my apartment after the party and it was fine. It was fine that night and all the other nights. Even when Charley came back we didn't let that stop us.

Fay had a firm white body rounded so soft that you couldn't keep your hands off it. I used to wonder why Charley took so many trips until I made it my business to see what he looked like.

He was the type that always walked with his shoulders back and took in a lot of fresh air. But he'd been breathing the stuff for sixty-five years and now he got his kicks fishing for tarpon.

In two weeks I had a new car and I re-opened my bank account. The sun was shining for me and I could see that the setup could go on for a long time.

Just how long Fay had in mind I found out one evening as we lay there.

First she moved a lock of my hair away from my forehead. "I know you're no damn good," she said.

"Oh?" I said. "A fine time to start complaining."

"What I mean is that you're a complete rotten heel."

I reached for the cigarettes on the night stand. "What brought up the insults?"

Fay accepted the cigarette and a light. "I just thought you ought to know that you're not fooling me. And then, too, there's the terrible fact that I love you."

I tried to blow smoke rings. "I love you too. It's a maddening, soul-searing love."

"My dear Phil," she said. "You don't love anyone but yourself. There's your soul-searing love."

I looked back up at the ceiling and kept quiet.

"I suppose I could get a divorce," she said. "But you wouldn't like that. I probably couldn't get enough money out of Charley to satisfy you."

I was glad to see that she was being sensible. So many of them get the divorce idea without thinking about money. That's when I put on my hat and go for the door.

"And yet I'm stupid enough to love a rat like you," she said. "I like to have you around."

I met her eyes. *I'll be damned,* I throught. *She really does.*

I brushed my lips lightly over her eyelids. "Relax I'm around now."

"Sure," she said. "As long as Charley pays the freight and doesn't know what's going on."

She was quiet for a while and then she said, "I've been thinking about something else. I'd have money then."

I was interested. "And that?"

Fay watched me with thoughtful eyes. "Suppose we killed my husband."

I sat up and brushed the sparks from my chest. "Get that idea out of your head fast."

She smiled faintly. "It could look like an accident."

"I've heard that one before. Think about something else, baby. You're making me nervous."

Charley came back from another one of his healthy trips and I saw her only twice in the next week. Both times we nearly got into arguments because she kept harping on the accident subject.

I guess that's why I hit the bottle too hard that night when she had to go some place with Charley.

Ordinarily I go easy on the wet stuff because I know I can't handle it. But Fay had me worried with her talk and I could see a good thing coming to an end.

The drinks stacked up inside of me and by the time I was having trouble telling up from down, I was in the Third Ward.

I had a palm against a building to keep me from falling and was wondering where the hell all the taxis were.

That's when I met Fred.

He was a little sniffling man with frightened shoulders and he eyed me from the doorway of a closed grocery store.

"Keep moving, Bo," I snapped at him. "I'm not going to pass out."

He passed a grimy hand over his nose. "I wasn't gonna roll you, Mister."

He watched me, ready to move on if I came closer. "Mister," he said. "I ain't had a thing to eat in days."

"You make me cry," I said, after a hiccup. "Starve somewhere else."

My hand slipped on the wall and I almost fell.

I closed my eyes for what I thought was a second, but it must have been longer. He was near enough to grab when I opened them.

I got him by the shirt front, but he was a wiry little bastard and he twisted away before I could throw a punch.

He scuttled twenty feet before he turned and snarled. "You rich slobs think you can push everybody around."

I considered going after him, but it seemed like work. He stood there hating me and then the liquor inside me began to talk.

"What'll you do for a couple of bucks?" I asked. "Anything?"

He stared at me, hope flicking in his eyes.

I fumbled for my wallet and took out two hundreds. "Pretty, aren't they, bending in the wind that way?"

His eyes fondled the money and automatically he cleaned the tips of his right hand on his pant's leg.

I found another hundred and fanned myself with the three bills. "Would you kill for three hundred? That's a lot of bottles."

His tongue wet his lips and I stood there grinning at the way he leaned for the money.

His eyes began thinking for his head and he looked at me. "What's his name?"

I should have stopped right there and put the money back in my wallet. But I was rolling and I pushed it further. "A real important man," I said. "Charley Whittier."

A taxi pulled around the corner then and I took my eyes away from him as I flagged it.

A second too late I felt the tug as he jerked the hundreds from my fingers. He slipped into an alley before I could even remember to curse.

That's how I met Fred.

Charley Whittier took off again, this time for Kentucky to look over some horses, and I took Fay to dinner after his plane left.

She started talking about it right away.

"I hired a man today," she said.

"Yes?" I said. I was enjoying the steak and wasn't paying much attention. "Somebody quit at your place?"

"Not a servant," she said sharply. "He's going to do what you're afraid to do."

I stopped eating. "What do you mean?"

Her words were clear and should have been whispered. "I hired a man to kill my husband."

She said it just like that. Real cold-blooded.

I put down my knife and fork and glanced around the room. I was pretty sure no one else had heard her, but I still didn't feel calm. "You're crazy," I said.

"Yes," she said. "You make me that way."

"You couldn't get away with it. Call it off."

She looked down at the tablecloth. "No."

I pushed my chair away from the table. Fay put her hand on my arm. "He'll make it look like an accident."

I shook my head. "Too many things can go wrong."

"It's the only way for us," Fay said. "I don't want you only part time."

I got up. "Part time is better than no time, baby."

She saw I meant it. "All right, Phil," she said slowly. "I'll call it off."

Charley came back from Kentucky with two yearlings. But he never did get a chance to see them race.

The day after he returned I picked up the paper to read about how he died.

It seems that Charley made a habit of taking walks in the evening. Usually he went to a lonely point where his estate faced the ocean.

It was here that he must have slipped, the papers said, and fallen down the steep palisades to the rocks below. There were no witnesses to the accident.

I kept away from Fay for two weeks and spent the time sweating over every item the papers carried about Charley's death.

The whole thing passed without making a smell. The death was ruled accidental.

I decided it would be all right to see Fay again.

She had her hand on her hip when I came. "Well," she said. "That was a nice long decent interval. How good to see you again."

"I'm glad you had sense enough not to phone me," I said. "You can never tell about wire tapping."

Her black eyes met mine. "What are you talking about?"

"As long as it's over, honey," I said, "we can forget about it." I watched the tightness of her dress and the way she moved. "I missed you a lot, baby."

She didn't quite believe me, but she came to me. Later I thought I might as well ask the question.

"*Was* it an accident?"

She ran a hand along my cheek. "Of course it was an accident."

"That's the way we'll think of it," I said. Then I smiled before I kissed her.

Fred came to see me a few days later.

He hadn't used any of the three hundred to help the outside of him and he smelled of dampness.

"You got a peculiar kind of guts," I said. "You steal from me and then you come up for a touch."

He trembled with hangover uneasiness. "You can't say I stole it," he said, his voice a whining flutter. "You remember, don't you?"

I felt coldness creep into my

hands. "What the hell do you mean?"

He gained a faint confidence. "You read the papers, don't you? Like about the accident to Mr. Whittier."

"And you claim what?"

His face got wise. "I don't claim nothing. I just say I didn't steal the money. Get me?"

He tried a snaggle-tooth grin. "I had a hard time finding you. I sure could use another hundred."

He was a little man whose life was the warm sleep made by wine. It would be his word against mine, if he ever talked.

I could say it had all been a joke, or deny I had ever seen him before. But once the cops listened, they'd begin to dig and I didn't want that.

The main thing was not even to give them the idea.

Fred stood straighter now. "If I don't get the hundred I'll have to sleep on a park bench tonight. I might get picked up and cops make me so nervous I talk a lot."

And so I gave Fred his first hundred.

He gets it every week now. Sometimes by check, because since Fay and I got married we do a lot of traveling.

It's always a hundred. No more, no less. Maybe he's smart that way. For only a hundred a week I don't get any drastic ideas.

It just shows the way drinking can cost you. You get into a situation like that where you have to pay a faking runt like that.

Not that liquor doesn't help sometimes. It did the other time. I don't think I would have had the nerve otherwise or even considered the idea if I hadn't had too much to drink.

Maybe that's why I don't have nightmares about it.

Charley did an awful lot of clawing and screaming before I finally managed to throw him off that cliff.

Short Story

London police were recently looking for an itchy thief. Maurice Cheepen had reported that someone stole his 40-flea circus.

Alibis Absolute

Police in Austin, Texas, made a futile effort to find a witness to the tavern fight which ended in the slaying of Gabriel C. Guerra, 22. Lt. Merle Wells reported: "There must have been 50 people in the tavern, but they all said they were in the restroom."

Oedipus

BY
WALT SHELDON

I SUBMIT the following document not only as part of the Lampen case, but also as a revelation of a remarkable psyche. Lampen had evidently kept this journal, if it may be called that, the greater part of his adult life, but I commence with the first entries to mention his associations with me, in which his relationship was that of patient. In the interest of continuity I have excised the dates, which were intermittent, since Lampen apparently made entries only when the mood, or indeed, the compulsion was upon him, and I have deleted some of the more irrelevant ramblings, though I submit them elsewhere in this case history as almost classic examples of fugue.

"When grown he left Corinth, an oracle having warned him he would kill his father and marry his mother."

Oh, I know I went to him myself, and I keep going to him. Of my own accord. *He* reminded me of that today.

In some ways he's sharp.

He said I was still fighting. He said I didn't really want to be cured, yet.

Okay. Right in one respect, wrong in another. Two different levels. That's what they all don't recognize—the *levels* of existence. It's basic. Like the earth and the air. An egg boils right in three minutes at sea level. Takes five minutes in Denver or Mexico City. Same egg, same air. But different levels. I've had this worked out a long time.

He asked me again why I'd come to him.

"Doc, do you insist on reasons? Main reasons, I mean. If you do, you're just like everybody else who doesn't understand. Sure, I know I'm upset. And not happy. Not happy with my wife or job or where I live or what I have to put up with day to day. See? I admit that, I don't try to fool anybody about it, and I'm honest with myself. Only it was a combination of things why I came to you. Couple of people had mentioned I ought to see a psychiatrist, of course. To hell with them.

Then I saw your office sign a couple of times. Heard about you here and there. After all there aren't many psychiatrists here in Santa Fe. But then I've always been interested in psychiatry. Human mind fascinates me. Maybe that sounds funny to you because I haven't much formal education and I come strictly from the wrong side of the tracks; but I read a lot, Doc, I read more than most people with degrees and so on, and that's how I know about things. How do you think I became a good professional photographer? Do you think I went to school, or anybody taught me? I did it myself, the way I do everything else. Read, studied, practiced. Years. I'm thirty now. I started when I was fifteen. I didn't go to movies or dances and things like the others; I worked at what I wanted to do. That's how I got where I am."

Then he smiled his fatherly smile, the one I don't like. I ought to do him a favor and tell him to get rid of that phony smile. Who does he think he fools? He said, "Just where are you, Don?"

That's another thing I don't like. The way he uses my first name. Like I was a child. I told him where I was. I told him I was a free-lance photographer who made a living at it, and had done some pretty good things. I'd been in LIFE, LOOK, COLLIER'S and a hundred others. Won prizes. I'd been hung in exhibitions. How many did he think could make the grade like that? That's what none of them understand. How tough it really is, and how few can really do it.

He didn't get it.

"What do you take pictures of usually, Don?"

"Anything. I can photograph anything."

"People? Buildings? Landscapes?"

"What's that got to with it? People mostly, I guess."

"Who?"

"Who? Anybody. People on the streets. Indians. My wife. A lot of Betsy. Not fashion stuff, nothing like that. Nudes, character stuff. I can go and photograph her and win a prize with it somewhere tomorrow. Only most of these prize contests are small-time stuff. Strictly for amateurs."

"How about yourself? Do you ever take a picture of yourself?"

I remember specifically that he said that. Some of this other conversation is approximate, but I remember that verbatim. The question made me angry. I don't know why exactly. Something about the way he said it, I guess.

"I never take a picture of myself!" I said.

Only that wasn't exactly true. I didn't tell him about all the self-portraits I'd tried to take, and how I'd then spent hours in the darkroom, cropping, spotting, dodging, diffusing, changing contrasts, and how I'd thrown away every picture and never even bothered to hypo and wash one.

I remember he made a note. He smelled something. Like I said, he was sharp in some ways.

What did I start writing about this visit for? Oh, yes. I remember now. All this other stuff is just guck. The big thing was that this time Dr. Polesi gave me the idea how to do the murder. I mean he triggered me off, and I worked out the idea myself, like I do everything else.

I think, as the talk went on, I said something about shooting portraits.

"Shooting?" said Polesi, raising his eyebrows. They're real thick and bushy; he ought to trim them. But maybe not. I thought I'd like to shoot him, just as he sat there, and catch that same expression, eyebrows and all. "But you hesitate to —" he paused — "to shoot yourself?"

And that gave me the basic idea right there.

Well, I've got a lot of the details worked out now. And I'm getting real excited about the thing, like I do sometimes when I get on a really hot photo story and I *know* it's going good.

Funny, the way enthusiasm goes. Comes and goes, I should say. Polesi says I have an erratic drive, not a stable one. That's just more of his definitions. That's all he does, sits back and defines things. I don't know why I keep going to him. At fifteen bucks a visit, too. And that's supposed to be cheap. I don't know why. So he points out that I've held two dozen jobs and al-

ways quit just when I was getting someplace. And that I can't even keep on one track free-lancing — soon as I do one type of assignment I get bored with it and look around for another kind of thing to do. That's supposed to be wrong? I'd expect it from most of the clods that make up the human race, but a psychiatrist's supposed to understand things. Why is it nobody else can understand a really active mind?

All right, nuts to Polesi.

I came out of the darkroom this afternoon and Betsy was sitting, drinking coke and reading a movie magazine. My God, if she'd only stop doing that all the time! What does she get out of life? I've worked like the devil and we have a nice southwest-style house up Canyon Road, not big, but nice, with a patio and a little cactus garden, and we sweat sometimes between checks, but we usually manage to eat and even have a few drinks now and then. What does she want, anyway?

"You drinking coke again?"

"Why, sure, Don. It's warm today."

Oh, that sickly smile of hers! That half-afraid smile! If only she'd stop cringing! If only she'd fight back!

"Why do you read those stupid movie magazines?"

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, and closed the magazine. I wished she'd thrown it at me, then I could have thrown it back, then we could have fought and had it out. But she's a woman. She sticks. She knows she's got me now and she sticks. Meal ticket, that's what I am. But how do you know about a woman when you're just a kid on your way up and you meet her and you're as stupid as she is at that time, culturally and everything, I mean? How do you know that in ten years you're going to outstrip her?

She got up and put her body against me. That body of hers. It's still good. Soft and firm at the same time, if you know what I mean. She put it against me and I got all charged up. Into the bedroom. Same thing. All charged up, and nothing, absolutely nothing. It isn't logical. What would Polesi know about something like that?

The shadows from the Venetian blinds laid strips across her body, following the contours, defining them, as she lay resting afterward.

"We'll do a picture like that," I said.

I needed an excuse to take another picture of her. That was part of the plan to kill her. Only not right away; a few other things to be worked out yet.

I'm getting a kick out of planning this thing, and all the time Polesi doesn't even dream what's going on! I almost think that's the best part of it. I can loosen up with him now. Get a kick out of shock-

ing him and seeing him try not to show it.

"You say lead soldiers were your favorite toys when you were a boy?"

"Sure. Ever see these old kind? They came from Germany. They don't make them like they used to. Very real. All kinds of colors. All kinds of crazy uniforms. I remember the kind with big black hats —you know those fur jobs these guards, or whatever they are, wear? They had red coats and big mustaches. I used to like to melt them."

"Melt them?"

"It was the darndest thing. You could put them on one of these asbestos toaster grills—I don't think they make them any more, either. Good toast on these things. My mother used to make it that way, then put butter and cinnamon and sugar on. Anyway, you could melt the soldiers on the grill. Turn the heat on and they'd just melt away, slow. It was fun to watch. I only melted these guardsmen jobs. I don't know why exactly."

"I notice you wear a mustache, Don."

"Huh? What's that got to do with it?"

"Why?"

"Why? Why not? It's something to do. I look better with it."

"Did your father have a mustache?"

I laughed at him then. "Doc, how obvious can you get? Are you trying to pin some of this Oedipus nonsense on me? No, he didn't have a mustache."

"I'm not trying to pin anything on you, Don. I'm just trying to get a complete picture."

"I don't know why I keep coming to you. I'm darned if I see what you do but sit here and talk to me. Maybe I don't fit into any of the categories, huh?" I grinned at him. "Maybe I don't behave like anything the book calls for. Like that mustache business. No, Pop didn't have a mustache. I remember pretty clearly. He used to shave himself real close, but that black beard of his would always give his skin a dark, blue look. I'm not hairy like he was—take after my mother's side, I guess. Light beard. I can sometimes go two days without shaving."

"Just what did you used to think when you watched these soldiers melting?"

"Think? I don't know. Well, maybe I do know. I used to think they were dying. I used to think maybe they felt the fire and died slowly. I don't know why I wanted to kill the guardsmen. I took pretty good care of my other soldiers. One time when Pop got real sore at me he tossed my soldiers outside, in the garbage. He used to get these tantrums. I think I cried a whole day that time. Boy, was I sore at him."

"Did you want to kill him?"

"Pop? Don't be silly. I loved Pop. He gave us a pretty rotten

deal, leaving the family high and dry the way he did, but it's a funny thing, I always liked him best, and sometimes it was Mother that really got on my nerves. Do you know what? Pop used to sing me to sleep when I was real small. He used to sing a song I liked about The Land of Nod or something. I don't remember it. I remember he had a really good voice."

"You liked to sleep? You liked to go into the Land of Nod, as it were?"

"Sure. Always. I still like to sleep. Alone. Can't stand sleeping with anybody else. Betsy and I had a big hassel one time about it. She likes a double bed—nothing but twins for me."

"This is your land, the Land of Nod, isn't it? It's the place where you can do as you please. You're king there. Ever think of that?"

"Now what in blazes are you talking about, Doc?"

"Nod," he said. "Ever think of it? That's Don, spelled backwards."

I put down all this conversation in detail just to show what guck he put out. For fifteen bucks a visit.

Don't see how I can miss now. And I'd sure better keep this notebook under lock and key. If anybody ever reads *this*—??? !!!

Well, anyway, I have it figured out. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated. I shoot her with a pistol, in the head. I have a .38 Police Positive that practically nobody knows I have. Nobody who would ever have the remotest connection with Betsy and myself, anyway. I haven't had it out in a couple of years, except once or twice to clean it, and that was in the home. Never told anybody outside about it. I picked it up from a guy in Albuquerque a long time ago, when he needed ten bucks. Not registered, or anything. You don't need licenses and all that stuff in New Mexico.

The really clever thing is that I'll be right there, taking a picture of her as she gets shot, from a different direction, and nobody'll even have the faintest idea that I did it. Got that figured out. No complicated gimmicks to get in the way and leave traces, either. Nothing like this Sherlock Holmes stuff where the guy shoots somebody on a bridge and has a string and a weight on the pistol that pull it into the water. Nothing that foolish or fantastic for old Don Lampen.

Don Don Don Don Don Don Don.

D-O-N.

N-O-D.

Boy, imagine that Land of Nod kick of Polesi's. Isn't that crazy?

Polesi told me to write out my most vivid childhood experience, and I thought I'd write it here instead first. Then I can read it and decide if I want him to see it.

My God, I was terrified that day Pop was ranting and raving at

Mother. I can't even remember now exactly when it was. Maybe I was three or four or something like that. His voice shook the house. They were in the parlor. We had one of these old-fashioned parlors all sort of dark and green and smelling of stale tobacco smoke. There were heavy velvet portiéres between the parlor and the dining room. I peeked through them.

I couldn't understand everything he was talking about. She was sort of backed against the wall and all red-eyed and crying and oh God I didn't like the way she looked —sort of thin and bony, you know weak-like, and he didn't touch her or anything but he sort of loomed at her and waved his arms and his eyes were wild and shining and that big baritone voice of his shook the house.

He kept saying she was cold and barren. "You're barren, barren, barren!" he shouted at her. "You're cold and barren as a lump of clay!"

And she kept saying over and over again, "I can't help it! I can't help it!"

And she was crying, only dry, you know, no tears or anything.

Then I got sore and I went in and I was crying, too.

"Get out of here you little ——!" roared Pop.

"You're the reason she's so —— barren! It's all your fault!"

"Momma!" I screamed.

But she was too scared of Pop to let me come to her.

"You would help yourself a great deal to develop more of a social sense," said Polesi, and those bushy eyebrows of his went up and down. "Join something. The junior chamber of commerce, perhaps. A soft ball team."

"Now, Doc." I looked at him reproachfully. "That's the last thing I am. A joiner."

"I know that. But you're on your own too much. You were an only child to start with and thrown on your own resources, and of course that's how you developed much of your creative sense — that always comes out of introspection. Well, you can turn your creative sense outward now. An artist shows life as he sees it. He tries to do this with as much truth as he can command. Well, you're going to have to mingle a little more with others for a better insight into human nature."

"I've done pretty well with my art so far, haven't I? The big magazines don't buy just anybody's work, you know."

"Do you remember telling me you were unhappy because you could only come up to your own standards now and then? That you felt sterile sometimes, and that your productive phases were erratic? And that this was one of the things that sometimes threw you into those terrible depressions?"

"Well, maybe I said something like that, sure, but—"

"Well, you're drawing only on your inner self, Don. You're suck-

ing yourself dry. Get out a little, and put some new grist in the mill."

I guess this was one of the fairly sensible ideas Polesi had.

Don't have time just yet to go joining any chambers of commerce, though. I can get to it later. When I finish what I have to do.

Right now, being just myself, and answering just to myself is an advantage. I wouldn't feel right now if Pop were still around, or if Mother was still living, or if I had any brothers or sisters or anything. The way Ma had to go, that was awful, but it was the best thing. Toward the end even morphine and that stuff didn't do her any good. That doctor. He was something like Polesi. Stuffy, evasive, wouldn't say what he meant. Wouldn't even say the word cancer right out.

Oh—I almost forgot. This crazy Polesi. I made a slip of the tongue with him, one of these accidental things you do that don't mean anything, and boy the way he hopped on it you'd have thought I had obligingly cut my belly open for him and spread it apart and said, "Look!" Those hairy eyebrows of his, real dark and black and hairy, like bear fur, like bushy hats on his eyes—I can hardly keep my gaze off them when I'm with him.

He asked me what Ma had died of.

"Cancer of the suture," I said.

He said, "What?"

I laughed. "I think that's what they told me. Sounded not quite right to me. Could of sworn that's what this doctor said. Isn't there any such thing, or something like it?"

He scribbled on his pad and frowned a minute. Then he looked up. "Suture," he said, "could be an anagram of the word 'uterus'."

For fifteen bucks a visit he plays word games.

Well, I went around again tonight shooting in windows. With the .38 Police Positive, I mean.

This is really the neat part of it, the way I build the thing up. Betsy's going to be shot through an open window, at night, by somebody apparently off his rocker, somebody that just goes around shooting at people for no reason, so to make that plausible I have to establish somebody like that. I've done it twice, and it's made the newspaper both times; the second time on the front page: ARMED MANIAC STRIKES AGAIN. I really got a laugh out of that one.

The way they blew it all up, exaggerated it.

For one thing, I made sure the rooms were empty before I shot into them, and even then I aimed up high on the wall or someplace like that so I wouldn't really hit anybody. I think anybody who would go around killing innocent people just because he had his own personal project would be pretty much of a heel.

She threw her body at me again. And then she had to spoil it digging her fingernails into my back. I can't stand pain. Little pain, I mean. One time I broke my arm and I didn't even cry or anything. But I don't like little, sudden pains. They're like loud voices suddenly splitting the silence and blasting in your eardrums.

I called her Bedsy instead of Betsy. I said I had my own bed, and that was mine and nobody else could come in it. Holy smoke, a man's got to have some privacy, sometime, doesn't he?

Looked at her face. Sort of examined it carefully and analyzed it with my eye, I mean, the way you do when you're thinking about how to take somebody's portrait. You know, that's the funny thing, sometimes I like her face. I mean sometimes it sort of fascinates me and I can sit there and study it for minutes on end and kind of get a bang out of that. She has sharp planes on her face, not thin, I mean, but real definite dividing lines, like that main shadow along the cheek and down to the side of the chin. It's sort of like my own face, only I don't mean exactly like my own. She's darker than I am—her hair's actually pretty nice, real thick and dark and Irish. But the way her face is laid out, I guess she could even be mistaken for my sister. Not that she *resembles* me, not like a twin or anything, but she sort of looks like the Van Nesses. That's Mother's side of the family, the Van Nesses.

I was almost getting so I didn't want to kill her until she dug those fingernails in. I could get a divorce, I suppose, if I tried hard enough, though she's said enough times she doesn't want a divorce and she'd make it as tough as possible for me if I tried to get one. No, she didn't exactly say that, either. She doesn't ever fight back or come out and say things. But I know she would just the same. She's that way. She sits there real quiet and drinks coke and reads those moronic movie magazines and pretends to agree with you and do everything you say but all the time she just quietly goes and does what she pleases.

I'm getting real excited now about planning this thing. I don't mean I'm going to get any jungle bang out of the business of killing or anything. In fact, I know it's going to hurt me because I hate to inflict pain just as much as I hate to be hurt myself, only I know this isn't going to hurt, it's just going to be all over with before she even knows what happens. I wouldn't hurt her. Somebody like Polesi probably wouldn't believe it but I've never even lifted a finger to her, not even when I was so mad with her I couldn't see straight. That's what he doesn't understand. He talks about the emotions. I don't operate with the emotions. I get a kick out of mental things like reading and playing chess and working out a

good photo and planning a thing like this so it'll be perfect.

She brought a basket of wet wash out of the laundry this morning. You know, a sort of oval-shaped wicker basket with sheets and towels and T-shirts and stuff she'd just washed in it. Wet wash has a regular smell. A real clean, steamy smell. I always liked it, ever since I was a kid. She put the basket down and I leaned over and smelled it, and then I kind of rubbed my cheek over the wet cloth and stuff, enjoying it. She saw me do this and she didn't say anything but she looked surprised. No, she hasn't got the imagination to like anything like the smell of wet wash. No sensitivity. I don't know what I ever saw in her.

You could have knocked me over with a feather.

"Did you ever go hunting?" Polesi asked.

"No. Hunting, fishing, that kind of stuff bores me."

Then he said, "Did you ever feel the urge to kill a living thing?"

I'll say this for myself, I didn't bat an eye. "Kill?" I said. "I don't even like to hurt things."

Don Don Don Don Don.

D-O-N.

Donodonodonodon.

SUTURE (sü' cher), n., v. 1. seam formed in sewing up a wound. 2. method of doing this. 3. one of the stitches or fastenings used. 4. a sewing together or a joining as if by sewing.

I looked it up.

I like her, like I like her face and all on a certain level. A different level. There are always different levels, that's what most people don't realize.

I did it all just like I

Start again. Hard to write. This slow way, think faster than I write and come to the end of a sentence forgot already how I was going to go on.

Built it up beautifully and she never even suspected the slightest thing. Evening. "Like to take those venetian-blind pictures tonight?" I said.

"What venetian-blind pictures, dear?" Mind like a grasshopper's. She'd forgotten all about it. Told her again, made her remember how the slats had made lines on her body that time, following the contours, almost like an old fashioned pen-etching only she wouldn't understand what that was.

I set it up in the livingroom, right in front of the big sliding windows that open to the patio. I put one flood light on a stand outside to shine through the blinds. Then I put a reflector and another flood inside to relieve the shadows. I spread out a plain blanket for her to lie on, looked at it and didn't like the texture; so I got a sheet instead.

She stripped and put a kimono

on, then sat there and read the evening paper while I checked exposures and things. There was another story in it about the crazy maniac who was going around shooting into people's windows for no reason and probably would kill or hurt somebody if he wasn't careful. They'd dug out some of the bullets and they were from a .38 and the markings all matched. Big stuff for the newspapers.

She lay down on the sheet and I fooled around a while posing her, making her move her arms this way and that, fold her legs, twist her torso, turn her head and so forth. Good body, really a good body, Betsy's. She didn't start any funny business. She learned a long time ago I can't stand that when I'm concentrating on shooting her.

Shoot. Take a

I had to rest and start again now. Guess I slept. Dreamed about a whole bunch of soldiers in big hairy bear hats marching past only none of them had any eyes. Big drum beat. It went *don don don don don!*

Then I said, "All right. Stay like that. Don't move now."

I shot a couple to make it look right. Look too phony if it happened on the first shot. I used the Rollei and low speed, fine grain stuff. Then I made her change her pose a little and went over and kissed her on the cheek. She said, "What's that for?"

I didn't tell her.

"Okay just hold it while I change the outside light," I said.

I put the self-timer on the shutter button and cranked it back. It takes thirteen seconds. It made its soft clockwork noise as I walked away. I stood outside in the cool night and it wasn't really dark outside on account of the floodlights and everything but it felt dark if you know what I mean. You know how the stars are in these big cloudless New Mexico night skies. They look clean. It was awful quiet and I could just faintly hear the timer purring through the open sliding door.

Then I started breathing hard, I couldn't stop myself from that, and I looked at her, nude and relaxed in there, and the shadows from the slats tracing all the curves of her body, and I analyzed and thought what made those curves so beautiful to the eye was the way they never kept on the same curve but changed all the time, taking your eye along. They were always going on a different level.

Her skin was smooth and pink and without any marks, like a baby's. She's like me, she can never stay out in the sun long enough to get a decent sunburn. I had her head turned so that there was a real division between the front plane and the side plane, and one of the slat shadows went right down that line, tracing and defining it. Made her face look more like mine than ever. Only on a different level.

I held the pistol steady at arm's length, and spread my feet and turned my body sideways and shifted my hand on the butt until it was exactly right for a slow even squeeze. I lowered the sight pip until it rested right below her temple.

Beautiful, I mean real beautiful. And I could see she wasn't me at all. It was my fault she was that way. Not so beautiful, I mean, just everything. We have our house a little up in the rolling dry hills that are dotted with those bluish clumps they call chamiso, and the land is yellow and barren.

It was my fault barren. I'd always wanted to. Destroyed and melted and down down down. Down Don. Had to be done. Had to be Don.

Turned the pistol and pointed it at my own head and pulled the

The above was the final entry in this patient's remarkable record. It occurs to one that even in this terrible moment of schism there was a trace of inhibition to prevent him from carrying out his subconscious deathwish and destroying himself. I might also comment that it is actually more difficult than most suicidally bent persons believe to destroy one's self successfully. At any rate Lampen did not put a bullet into his brain, but seriously injured the back and side of his neck and the base of his occipital region, in the freakish way that bullets have of inflicting wounds.

He was operated upon, and, as soon as he had recovered sufficiently to talk, he confessed quite openly to the police, explaining his scheme to discard the self-timer and offer the picture as evidence that he had been behind the camera when his wife was shot from the outside. He seemed proud of his cleverness.

For some time I had recognized his basic compulsion as one to destroy himself in retribution for the guilt he felt in connection with his mother's death. I warned the hospital that he might try again. Evidently they were unable to take thorough precautions. Lampen, after making that last entry in his journal, brought about his own death by causing a hemmorhage of the carotid artery.

He did this by ripping out his sutures.

Barefoot Bandit

In Minneapolis, Minn. a holdup man literally "ran right out of his shoes" while fleeing a $10 robbery. One squad car picked up his shoes, while another picked up the limping culprit.

His trademark was two round sticks at either end of a short rope. Frieda was almost envious . . .

The Strangler

BY
A. I. SCHUTZER

IF YOU looked at Frieda the way her clients did, lying flat on your stomach on a rubbing table while she pounded your back, you only saw a piece of her over your shoul-

der, and what you saw was blurred every time Frieda slammed her fist into your shoulder blade or your kidney.

When the pain was gone, and your eyes came into focus again, you realized that Frieda was on the weary side of forty, and you noted that the grey was creeping in and darkening her once blonde hair, that the features of her face were regular, precise, almost mathematically correct, and the composite effect was that of a woman who was cold and distant and kept her thoughts to herself.

If you were a client of Frieda's and a man as well, and you happened to look around when Frieda was bending over you, digging her knuckles into your neck muscles, her uniform hanging down from her bosom and exposing a triangle of flesh, you were startled to discover that Frieda didn't confine herself in a brassiere when she worked, and you realized that years of pounding other people's bodies, male and female, had ironically done for Frieda what her ministrations had never done for her clients. Her firm Germanic breasts dipped their flags to no one, her body was deceptively youthful, her waist small, her flesh firm and supple.

If you had seen Frieda that afternoon near Christmas, not from the point of view of the client on the rubbing table, but the way the man in the Santa Claus suit saw her, and the way the boy whose fingers were closing around a girl's neck saw her, you would have known Frieda by the determination, the unflagging forward push, that had tormented her all her life and drove her on, never giving up, never asking for mercy, from one moment of time to the next.

It had been snowing all morning and the snow on the sidewalk had been pounded into a dirty slush, like grapes into wine, by the footsteps of the holiday crowd in their last minute stampede of Christmas shopping. Frieda grimly shouldered her way through the shoppers, her own galoshes leaving a trail of dark pockmarks that filled with water in the dirty snow behind her.

She reached a patch of wet sidewalk under a canopy where the snow hadn't reached and stopped to stamp her galoshes on the ground and shake the clumps of wet snow loose. Just long enough for the man in the Santa Claus suit to detach himself from the curb and approach her with a collection box in his hand.

"Give something, lady?"

Frieda shook her head sourly, her fingers tightening around the handle to her purse. She turned her shoulder against the little man and looked the other way. It stung him beyond the importance of the moment or the action. It left him hanging there, his mouth open, his hand sticking out. Who is to say what half-forgotten hurt the snub reminded him of?

His eyes flared up with hate, his face turned red with the rush of blood, his body actually trembled with rage. Doggedly, hopelessly, he pursued Frieda across the sidewalk, jabbing his collection box against her side.

"Them that's got it, lady, like you, just don't give it away, do they?"

Frieda pushed him away and quickened her steps. He had no right, she told herself. There was no money to spare. She had just enough for a subway token, a newspaper, a cheap meal for Carl and herself. It was always like this at Christmas. The worst time of the year. Nobody wanted a massage. They forgot about the aches in their bodies, and the fact that Frieda depended on them for her money.

To Frieda's left was a newsstand against the building, and the headlines on the tabloids, the News and the Mirror, registered on her brain: STRANGLER STRIKES AGAIN . . . DOES STRANGLER SEEK SEX THRILLS?

She knew what the story would be like. They had been repeated so often now. Another body found. The torso twisted, the face swollen, the tongue hanging out. She had seen all the photographs, the center spread, the back page. The close-up of the rope biting into the neck.

Just a few steps ahead of Frieda, at the entrance to the subway, a boy in his late teens stepped up behind a girl and closed his hands around her throat. It was an action that could have meant many things. A caress. A quick squeeze, a twist, a broken neck, another killing.

Whatever it was, it halted Frieda's step in mid-air. The Strangler, Frieda thought, would he be like this. A young boy, innocent-looking, with a smile on his face. Would it be possible that he would give himself away in a careless moment? Or was this something more sinister, the carefully calculated approach to the victim, the touch of love, the whisper in the ear, the lips brushed across the cheek?

Frieda took a hesitant step towards the young couple. Later she would not be sure just what had moved her, if she had intended to speak, to cry out a warning to the girl, or perhaps, even worse, to help the boy; for sometimes even death is a solution. She knew that as well as anyone. Only a brief moment separated these three, the boy, the girl, the masseuse, from embarrassment, a scene, a collecting crowd.

The girl broke the spell. She smiled at Frieda and turned her body against the boy's until she faced him. His hands dropped from her throat to her shoulders. They kissed, and no one saw or cared but Frieda.

In a moment she was pushed past them, and they past her; out of her life. Who knows, but Frieda may

have wondered about this moment later; it might have become important to her in the years to come. Small things, strange things, occupy our minds, pull us back in time, make us remember, make us wish we could forget . . .

Frieda walked to the top of the subway stairs. For a moment she stood there, fought the tide of people, gripped the railing, planted her feet firmly on the ground—like an island with water eating away at its shores. She stared down the steps into the darkness of the subway, feeling sorry for herself, wanting to cry, one thought blotting out everything else. Things could be so different if only he would give up. They had it so badly, there was no point in his holding on to life the way he was. Why didn't Carl just die?

Ten minutes later Frieda came up out of the subway in the downtown tenement section of cold water flats where she lived with her husband. Down one street, across at the intersection, up the next street, Frieda went, the snow coating her with a moist white film. She walked into a tiny candy store, got her evening paper, walked the dark corridor to the phone booth in the back, stepped inside, and dialed her phone-answering service. The phone rang, went off the hook at the other end, and Frieda heard a woman breathe heavily into the mouthpiece.

"It's me," Frieda said. "Frieda Hochberg. Any messages for me?"

"You got one for nine tonight," the voice said in Frieda's ear. "Mr. Carruthers. He said you know the address. Hold on. I'll look in your box."

Frieda waited. For the first time she was conscious of the wetness. It was in the phone booth, in the snow that was melting on her; it steamed against the lightbulb over her head; it was in the damp tabloid whose limp pages she tried to turn with one hand. Another murder victim, she told herself. They always take their pictures with their skirts above their knees, their bodies twisted. And the close-up, too, the dark line on the neck, the piece of rope nearby, the short round sticks on its ends. The trademark of The Strangler. God, but he was doing a job! She was almost touched by envy.

The clatter of a phone being picked up at the other end sounded in Frieda's ear. "No, Mrs. Hochberg," the voice said. "Nothing else."

Frieda hung up. Well, there would be that anyway. The few dollars for the massage would carry them through the holidays. Some liverwurst, perhaps, as a treat. A pack of cigarettes for Carl. A can of beer for her. She had that to look forward to.

She walked through the snow to the apartment house. There were three tedious flights of rickety stairs

to be climbed, a long dark hall to be walked down, before she could slip her key in the lock and let herself in the flat.

"Frieda? Is that you?"

The apartment was small, cramped; the walls squeezed you in. You felt like choking and running out. Frieda made some space. She put her hand on the curtain that draped the entrance to the room where her husband, Carl, lay in bed and ripped it to one side so that the curtain rings on the overhead pipe whined out. Carl had been peering at the window, and beyond, a patch of sky, the snow that was falling. He turned and looked at Frieda, and she at him.

While she waited for him to speak, she studied his face. It hadn't weakened anymore than usual. No further degree of fatigue. Only the everpresent feeling of looking at something that wasn't alive and didn't admit it. The skin on his face was taut, it shone with the translucency of a thin layer of wax; there were two spots of color in his cheeks; they looked false, as if put there with cosmetics. But Frieda knew better; this was her Carl as he was.

"You're late," he said softly.

She snorted. "I was in bed," she said, "with the Kaiser."

She knew how to torture him. It was the one thing that ate away at him, that destroyed him piece by piece. The one thought that stayed with him every waking moment. That somebody else was using her, enjoying her, laughing at him. Knowing that he could do nothing about it. She refused to tell him the truth, that nobody interested her any longer, not even him. He wouldn't believe her anyway.

She turned her back on Carl and went into the kitchen. Supper only took a few minutes to prepare. What there was of it. She lighted the gas, threw two cups of water and one cup of a gruelly soy-bean cereal into a pot and set it to heat on the flame.

"Why don't you answer me civilly," he called out from the bedroom, "when I talk to you."

Why does he bother me this way? she asked herself. If I had sinned, if I had hurt him or anyone else, if I had stolen that which didn't belong to me, if I had slept with other men, then it would be only right that I suffer for it and live out my days with him in the hate that we have for each other. But I didn't do any of those things. Instead things happened to me.

Frieda watched the mixture boiling in the pot, her thoughts elsewhere. Somewhere, she knew, she had taken a wrong turn. She searched her memory, looking for that pocket in her life, that intersection, when she had looked in the wrong direction, said the wrong word, thought the wrong thing, whatever it was that had brought her to this moment in her life in a dirty apartment with a husband

whom she hated, who was coughing his life away.

Well, it was too late now. She couldn't go back and change anything. She had to act in the now; she could change what was, not what might have been.

Frieda poured Carl's cereal into a soup plate and brought it in to him. "It used to be enough for you," he said, "to stand next to me in my uniform. If you don't remember, I do."

Fool. The word formed silently on her lips. I have to support you now. Are you forgetting that?

She laid the plate of cereal down in the crook formed at his groin. "There isn't anything else," she said.

His recriminations between spoonfuls of cereal, his talk of the Iron Cross, of marching on parade, his handsome uniform, his rank of days gone by, were no longer heard by Frieda. She was back in the kitchen, eating her cereal, her attention buried in the newspaper that she had opened on the table.

It was The Strangler again. Right up there in the front of the paper with the heads of governments, the love affairs of royalty, the vertically rising airplanes.

She envied The Strangler the money he was making at his highly specialized trade. If she had it, she could do anything she wanted. Change the direction of her life. Leave her husband, this room, this misery. Go to a small town, use the money to start a business. Put an end to the going out in all kinds of weather to other people's apartments. She would have a place of her own, where she could stay put, inside, never again to be cold and wet.

The newspaper told about the strangler's trademark, his weapon —a piece of rope with two short sticks at either end. Easy to grip, and easier to twist into a tight noose around a victim's neck.

Frieda would have been hard put to find an answer if you had asked her then why she got up from the kitchen table and went to the bedroom closet and cut a small piece of rope from her clothesline and tied its ends around two small dowels from the book rack on the dresser. Very likely she didn't completely understand the action herself then. Maybe it helped her to understand The Strangler, to make him something familiar and human like herself, standing there, holding the rope in her hands, fingering it, thinking about tightening it around a neck. It is a pretty sure thing Frieda didn't think then of killing with that rope.

"Why did you do that?" Carl asked from the bed.

She shrugged her shoulders and threw the rope into her bag. She didn't know herself. "I'll wash the dishes when I get back," she said. "I have an appointment. Carruthers. Don't wait up for me."

She knew what was coming. She

heard the words as she moved past the curtain against the wall on her way out of the bedroom. Bitter, searing, filled with hate of her, of himself, of any man who came close to her.

"Him again, Frieda?" he cried out. "I told you I didn't want you to see him anymore. You don't fool me with your lies. He's no client. Not the kind that wants a rub-down, a massage. Come back here!"

Frieda shuddered and kept on going, picking up her coat on the run, putting it on as she went down the three flights of stairs.

Carruthers lived in an apartment house in the Seventies off Park Avenue. His door was unlatched for he was expecting Frieda, and when she arrived and pressed the buzzer, he called out for her to come in. He was already lying, face down, on his rubbing table, a newspaper in his hands, naked except for a towel that was draped over his buttocks, his body warming under the rays of a sun lamp.

Frieda flicked the sun lamp off and went to work. She measured Carruthers off with a calculating eye, and dug her fist into the layer of fat that sloped down from his buttocks.

"Easy there!" he cried out, raising his head. It was a half hour before he rattled his newspaper and spoke again over the drumming sound of Frieda's fists.

"Fools," he said. "Why do they assume The Strangler is a man? Might be somebody like you. A woman with strong hands. Do a good job of it, too. Nobody would suspect her."

It registered on Frieda's mind. Her hands went on, pounding away, never missing a stroke. She looked past Carruthers' head at the newspaper. She moved closer to get a better look. This was a different photo of the last victim than the one she had seen. The dress was arranged differently here.

Frieda had moved too far forward. Her hand cracked into the back of Carruthers' neck. He twisted around, glared back at her over his shoulder, his nostrils quivering, his eyes bloodshot and moist. It made Frieda think of blood sausage, head cheese and jelly. She looked away, her stomach turning.

Up until that moment there had been an element of doubt in Frieda's mind. Now she knew. She could kill a man, a man like Carruthers. It was because Carruthers did not exist as a human being for her. He was muscles and fat, hairy fuzz and bone; he was a lump of clay. Something to be kneaded and punched and squeezed and rubbed with oil.

But Carruthers was wrong for her as a victim. Not that she didn't think he had the money. That wasn't it. Too many people knew she was giving him a massage that night. There was the girl at the phone answering service who made

the appointment, the doorman downstairs in front of the apartment house, even Carl who knew she was out tonight. No. It couldn't be Carruthers.

Carruthers never knew how close to death he had been. Perhaps he wouldn't have cared. Fifteen minutes later, wearing his robe, his body tingling, he paid Frieda off. There was a look a sadness on his face.

"I won't be needing you anymore," he said. "And you won't be kneading me." He laughed heavily, apologetically, and coughed wetly into the palm of his hand. "My business failed, you know. Plastics. Item went dead. I warned my partner, but the fool wouldn't listen to me."

"No, I didn't know," Frieda said. "I'm sorry." She turned and walked out of the apartment, pulling her coat tightly around her. She felt cold.

Frieda walked along slowly. She had been walking aimlessly for half an hour. She didn't know where she was going, and she cared less. There was an empty feeling inside of her. The loss of the few dollars that she got regularly from Carruthers for a massage seemed like the end of the world.

She was dimly aware of the cab that passed her and pulled to the curb down the block, of a man getting out, of the cab pulling away leaving him standing on the sidewalk. It was only when she had come abreast of the man that she saw he was in trouble.

Frieda caught the old man as he bent nearly double and started to fall. She held his struggling body in her arms, looked down the street at the cab that was fast disappearing, looked around her, at the brownstone they were in front of. There was no help anywhere. The street was deserted.

The old man could thing of only one thing. He needed air, he had to have it, he had to fill his lungs and keep his ribs from cutting him apart. He fought, he heaved his chest, he willed the air to whistle through his mouth, down into the clogged pipes that connected him to life.

Frieda gave up looking for help and held him while he struggled.

She put her lips close to the old man's hairy ear. "Do you live here? Is this your house?"

The old man tried to answer her. He twisted up his face. One of his fingers wiggled back and forth, not quite up to the task of transmitting the message he wanted to give to Frieda. His cheeks blew in and out, his eyes bulged with the effort.

Then, almost as quickly as it had begun, the old man's attack was over; he lay in Frieda's arms like a baby. In a voice that was low and weak he whispered to her.

"This is my house. Yes."

"Is there anybody at home who can help you?"

"No. I live alone."

When she thought about it later, Frieda realized that she had made up her mind to kill the old man almost from the first. Everything was in her favor. He was weak. He couldn't give her much of a struggle. He lived in an expensive home in an expensive part of town—that meant he had money. He lived alone; no one had seen her come to his help. There would be no witnesses.

"Look," Frieda said, "I can help you. I'm a masseuse. Let me get you in the house, and then I'll see what I can do."

Before the old gentleman had a chance to thank her and tell her that he was too old for her services, that they wouldn't do him any good, Frieda was helping him up the stairs to the door of the brownstone house, taking his key from his shaking hand and letting them inside. She had made it. No one had seen them enter.

The old man, his body still trembling from his attack, signalled that he wanted to go upstairs.

Things happened so quickly once they had gained the upstairs, the old gentleman didn't have time to protest. He was lucky he was too old for shame. Frieda had him stripped and on his stomach on the pads that covered the big table in the ornately furnished dining room, a towel across his scrawny buttocks, his back being gently massaged by her hands, before he could speak.

The massage might have gone on for another half hour, Frieda might have hesitated, might have lost her nerve altogether, if the old man hadn't sealed his own fate.

"I must pay you very well," he said. "Well enough so that you'll sit and talk with an old man after you've finished rubbing me down. And then maybe you'll come again."

At first Frieda didn't listen to what the old man was saying. Her hands rubbed and kneaded him with a will of their own. Her eyes were going about the room. He must have some money hidden somewhere, she told herself. They're all like that. The older they get, the more they want to have the money close. They fear the long walk to the bank.

"Nobody comes to see me anymore," the old man complained. "My children have forgotten me. They don't want to look into the eyes of a dying man. All they want is for me to get out of the way so that they can get my money."

Frieda's hands stopped moving on the old man's back. He took it as a sign that the treatment was over, and rolled from the table. Stiff-legged, clutching the towel around his middle with a boney hand, he made his way to a cabinet against the wall, opened a door, and reached inside for a strong box.

He had the metal box open, two ten-dollar bills in his hand, was even turning around, when Frieda

put the rope around his neck, locked the two sticks together, and turned it end over end until it was tight and the rope itself sank beneath a fold of skin.

The old man's body twisted to one side, his arms went out, the strong box went flying, money spilling out on the floor. He went down on one knee like a sprint runner and then his legs kicked out and he flopped on the floor, the towel falling away from his groin, revealing his withered, dried-out parts. Veins you would have though hadn't carried blood for years suddenly started to swell and turn purple. The old man struggled, his mouth worked, his tongue flopped. He's trying to say something to me, Frieda thought.

She was an amateur at killing; there was no question about that. She let curiosity get the better of her; she had to know what he wanted to say when he was this close to death. Her hands loosed the rope away from his flesh.

"I am not ready," he gasped. "I am not ready to die."

She'd been cheated, she felt. The rope came alive in her hands and went tight around his neck for the second time. The old man's mouth flew open, his tongue hung down over a corner, his eyes bulged; the machinery of his body shuddered to a stop.

Frieda lost track of time. Finally, uncramping her fingers, she let go of the rope.

The first shock of snuffing out a life was soon gone. The trembling in her legs had stopped; the momentary panic, the flush of heat, the heavy sweating, all had come to an end. She had work to do now, to remove any sign of her presence, to lay a false trail.

It was no easy task dressing the old man, dragging him across the floor, and then down the stairs without dropping her bag, but Frieda managed. She edged the door open with her toe and peered up and down the street. A low-slung foreign car was turning in at the corner and coming down the street. It passed Frieda, continued on a half dozen houses, and then pulled in at the curb.

Behind Frieda, somewhere in the house, she did not know where, a phone began to ring. Too late, she thought, to be calling him now. You should have called him earlier in the day when he could still feel loneliness. Now he doesn't care anymore.

As Frieda watched, a girl got out of the foreign car and ran up the steps to the door of one of the brownstone houses and let herself in. The foreign car pulled away from the curb and disappeared down the street. Behind Frieda, the phone stopped ringing. She swung the door open, dragged the body of the old man after her, down the steps, where she laid him to rest against the old iron fence.

Frieda studied the rope around

the old man's neck. Leave it there, she decided. She could always make another. And by its presence, it would be a red herring, a phoney, a false signpost for the police to follow on a trail that could only lead to The Strangler. If they got him, it might just as well be for this murder as for the others he had committed.

Without looking back, Frieda hurried down the street, a strange figure, a killer in a floppy hat, a loose-fitting coat, who wore no underthings because she had worked that night, her black bag held tightly in her hand, the only thing she possessed at the moment that even hinted of death, and that was packed tightly with stacks of crisp, green bills.

Some twenty minutes later Frieda came up out of the subway in her neighborhood. A kind of letdown had set in. Frieda trudged through the snow, her feet suddenly turned to lead, her body aching with fatigue. She was new at being a killer. It was hard work, she realized. Two rubdowns in a row. Then becoming excited when the old man had squirmed in the rope in her hands like a rabbit. Dragging him down the stairs. Standing at the doorway and sweating, waiting for the street to clear so that she could take him out and leave him with the rope around his neck.

She stopped at the corner and looked around her wearily. It was almost too much to walk the rest of the way to the flat, past the two kids fighting in the snow on the sidewalk, the old man with his baby carriage and roasting chestnuts, the cop on the beat who nodded to her. She was almost numb when she turned in at the entrance to the tenement where she lived, and started up the stairs.

Carl was awake when Frieda closed the door of the apartment behind her. "Did you get the money?" he asked. "Or did he fight you off?"

She leaned back against the door, her heart beating against her breast like a bird's. Carl knew, somehow; he knew that she had killed that night, that she had taken money from the old man. He would hold that over her now, threaten her with the police, with jail, with the electric chair. This is what he had always wanted, a club, a weapon over her head, something to make her go down on her knees, to make her weak again. It had all been for nothing, the killing. The bag, the money it contained now a dead weight in her hand, slipped to the floor.

"How did you find out," she asked, about the money I got tonight?"

"What's the matter with you?" There was anger in his voice. He felt she was abusing him with a petty deceit. "You told me you had an appointment with Carruthers tonight. Don't tell me you went there for nothing. The least you could

have gotten out of it for me was a pack of cigarettes."

"I forgot," she said.

Frieda slumped in a chair. She had to get away. He knew her too well. They'd lived together too long. One careless moment and she would be begging him to listen to her story, how she'd tightened the rope around the old man's neck, watched him die.

She'd thought about it differently before. This wasn't the way she'd planned it, coming home tonight. Not just one murder. She'd wanted to kill a lot of times, put away a lot of money, hide behind the real killer, the professional, The Strangler who'd terrorized the city.

Now she knew she'd have to move quickly, she'd have to get away. As tired as she was, there would be no waiting. She had to get out that night. The two or three thousand dollars of the old man's money that she had in the bag would have to do for her.

She would leave Carl, forget him, put him behind her forever. She would make a new start somewhere, a small town, a little shop.

It didn't take long. Frieda was packed in ten minutes, everything she owned in a cheap fibre-board valise they'd brought over with them years before from the old country. In that ten minutes she'd even had time to cut another piece of rope, duplicate the strangler's trademark, put it in her black bag with the money. One never knew. Wherever she was going, she might run short of money.

"Stay, Frieda, please stay," Carl had cried out at the end, after all the cursing and the shouting. And that was the way that she would remember him, half-rising from the bed, the tears rolling down his cheeks, his mouth twisted up in self-pity.

She walked out into the street, a lopsided figure, one shoulder down, one shoulder up, the valise on one side, the black bag with the money on the other. It was colder now, and the slush had frozen into ice underfoot.

She'd almost changed her mind at the last minute, almost stayed behind when Carl had broken down. It had been like tearing her own flesh or skin apart, to leave him at the end.

But she had to put thoughts like that out of her mind now. She had to concentrate on getting on a train and getting out of town. There were small details to be attended to and figured out. The picking of a town far away. The buying of a one way ticket. The changing of her name.

When Frieda stepped out into the path of the car, she heard, at the last second, its tires grinding in reverse on the ice, it's horn blowing desperately. She threw herself back, the valise skidding out of her hand and smashing against the curb. She clung to the black bag.

The car stopped, its wheels jammed up against the curb. The driver was out, running to her, helping her on her feet, apologizing, brushing the ice from her coat.

It was an awkward moment. They got over it by going down on their knees together, picking Frieda's things up out of the snow, and stuffing them back in her valise.

"Look," he said, when it was almost packed again, "I'm terribly sorry. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

Frieda snapped the lock shut on the fibre-board valise. She had already started to turn away, was about to say no. She looked up into the man's face as he hovered over her, concerned, anxious, helpful. For some reason he reminded her of the old man she had killed earlier that night, though this one was not old.

"Would you?" Frieda asked. "I was going to Grand Central to take a train."

He helped Frieda in the car, went around to the other side, got in, backed up, turned around, and headed uptown. "I really should have chains on my tires," he said. "Pretty slippery driving when the streets are like this."

The car was new; an expensive make. Queer, but the kind of car a man drives sometimes decides whether he will live or die. For that was the direction in which Frieda's thoughts were going. She'd forgotten about her fear of Carl and exposure, her flight, the earlier terror of the night.

The man started talking, his words droned on, a steady hum, a counterpoint to Frieda's thoughts. This was a chance the Gods had given her and she was going to make the most of it. One last job before she pulled out. She knew the type of man who was at the wheel. She'd seen their wallets when they'd paid her off after she'd given them a rubdown. Heavy, thick, crammed with money; big bills.

It was perfect. It flowed across Frieda's mind in a stream of pictures like a movie show. She'd get him to stop the car in a dark, secluded spot. She'd put the rope around his neck and twist it tight. He might even cry out but it wouldn't be very loud, for her hands were quick and strong. And then, when he was dead, she'd strip his wallet, shove his money in her bag, jam his body down against the floor under the steering shaft, and slip out, safe, untouchable, to leave behind a corpse with a rope around its neck; something for the tabloids and the police to think about, to believe The Strangler had struck again.

"I'm sorry," Frieda said. "I feel a little ill. The excitement before. The windows closed, the heater going. Could we pull up for just a moment and open the windows so I could get some air."

"Forgive me," the man said. "I should have realized."

He braked the car, and it slid into the dark quiet of an underpass, pulled in at the curb, and stopped. He pushed a button on the dash, an electric motor hummed, and the windows slid down. Cold fresh air came in through the open windows. It was welcome. Frieda breathed deeply and reached for her black bag. Her companion was quiet, almost thoughtful. He busied himself with the lighting of a cigarette, hardly glancing in Frieda's direction.

For the moment, Frieda was almost unaware that he existed. She was too busy with herself, unsnapping the clasp of her bag. Her hands went in the bag, searched, fumbled around, like feelers without eyes, hunting for the piece of rope with the round sticks on its ends.

The rope was elusive. She couldn't find it. She probed deeper, down to the bottom, into the corners of the bag. A wad of bills worked its way up her hand, past her fingers, to her wrist, half sticking out of the bag.

As her fingers closed around the rope in a corner of the bottom of the bag, she became conscious of the quietness, the stillness around her. It was good this way. They were alone. There would be no witnesses to the killing. She would have his money, and even his car, too, if she wanted it, in just another minute or so.

Frieda's strong muscular hands gripped the sticks at the ends of the rope. She was vaguely conscious of a feeling of movement at her side. She looked up, cocking her head to the side.

The first thing she noticed was the cold hard glitter in his eyes. Then her eyes caught his hands, spread out, holding the round sticks on opposite ends of the rope, as they moved lightening-fast to her throat.

She was too late to cry out, even to protest. She submitted like a child as the rope went tight around her neck and her head was twisted down to the seat so that her cheek rubbed against the damp leather and she could see the man who was killing her only out of her left eye.

He was talking to her, but it is hard to tell if she was listening to him. "You really shouldn't have showed me the hoard in your bag," he said. "All that money. I never meant to do this. You must believe me. You must—forgive me."

Frieda's left eye blinked once and a tear ran down her nose and into her mouth which gaped like an open wound. She didn't cry because everything was coming to an end for her. She cried because she knew that this was the way it had to be. Nothing had ever worked out for her. She was just an amateur after all. She'd had no right to try and fight back against the direction of her life, the bitterness, the meanness, the hate, the years of defeat, of Carl in bed on his back.

He tightened the rope around Frieda's neck and slowly choked the life out of her. A whimper came from her lips. If he had cared to lean closer, if he had been just the least bit curious, if he had bent his head, perhaps let up on the rope for just a moment, caught the question that was struggling on Frieda's tongue, thrown up by the tiny spark of consciousness that was still left to her, then he would have known that she was wondering, just like a woman, if this was the real thing, if he was The Strangler, or a counterfeit like herself.

Then the spark of consciousness was extinguished forever, the fire went out, there was nothing left, the struggle was over, the pain and the bitterness, the hate, the running away; all gone for Freida. She would never know, never have her question answered.

Just a body in the slush against the curb, twisted over a cheap fibre board valise, a rope around her neck, two sticks at its ends.

The photos made the front page, the center spread, the back page. Frieda would have been proud, if she'd been able.

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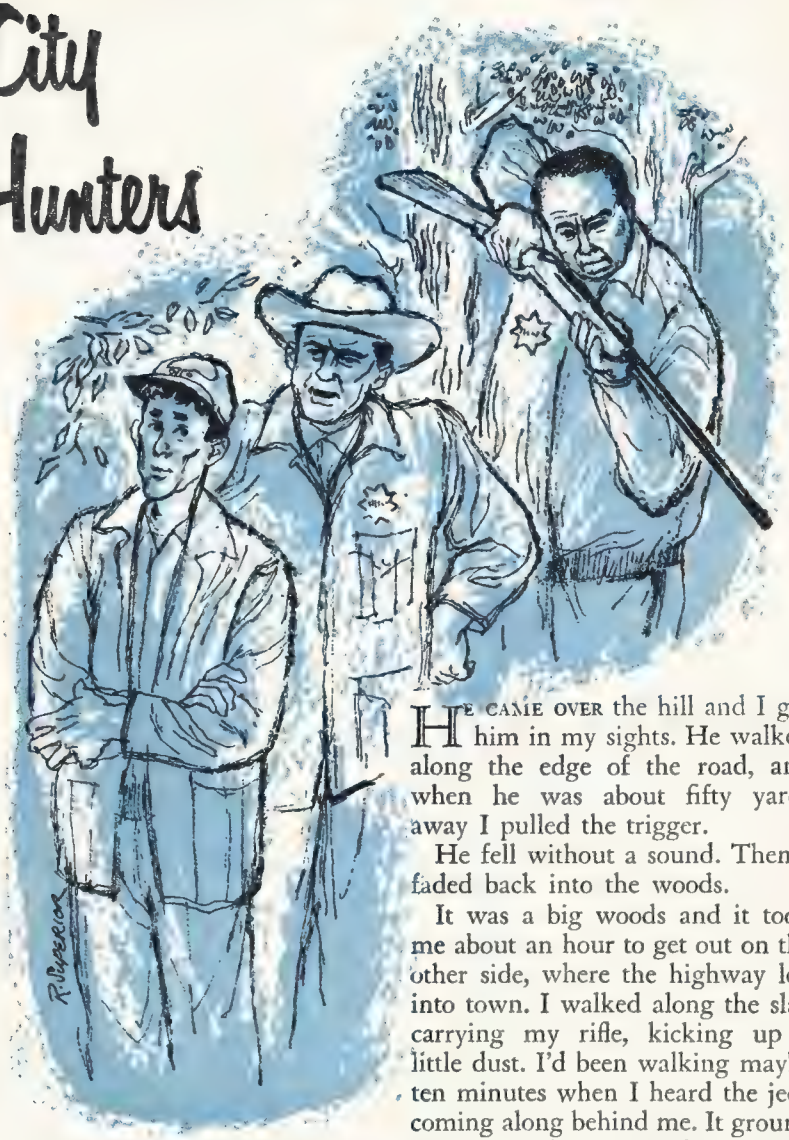
A good sheriff knows when he's got his man.
But those city hunters sure can foul things up.

City Hunters



BY GEORGE LANGE

He came over the hill and I got him in my sights. He walked along the edge of the road, and when he was about fifty yards away I pulled the trigger.

He fell without a sound. Then I faded back into the woods.

It was a big woods and it took me about an hour to get out on the other side, where the highway led into town. I walked along the slab carrying my rifle, kicking up a little dust. I'd been walking maybe ten minutes when I heard the jeep coming along behind me. It ground to a stop when it caught up with

me. There were two men in it—the sheriff and Jim Riley, a deputy. Jim was driving. The sheriff climbed out of the car and stood at the side of it, his hand resting lightly on the revolver he carried in a holster.

"Hi, Clem", he said.

"Hi, Al. Jim."

"Been huntin'?"

"Yep. Squirrels."

"Get any?"

"Nope. Shot at a couple. Missed."

"Huntin' long?"

"Couple hours."

"Been over near Mill Road?"

"Yep."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, I dunno. I ain't got my watch with me."

"About an hour ago, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"See anything of Ab Logan over thataway?"

"Yep, I seen him."

The sheriff seemed surprised. "What was he doin?" he asked.

"Comin' over the hill."

"Hm." He rubbed his chin with his left hand. "What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you saw Ab, what did you do?"

"Went the other way."

The sheriff didn't say anything for awhile. He pushed a small stone around with his toe. He glanced at Jim and then turned back to me.

"Nice rifle you got there, Clem."

"Yep. Pretty good."

"Mind if I look at it?"

I handed it to him, and he looked it over, broke it and saw it was empty, then put it up to his shoulder and sighted along the barrel. He sniffed at the muzzle.

"Been fired," he said.

"Yep."

"Didn't get no squirrels, huh?"

"Nope."

"Don't seem right somehow, Clem. You're a pretty good shot."

I shrugged. "Can't hit 'em every time."

"Hm. Could I borrow the gun, Clem?"

"What for?"

"Like to take it in to the city this afternoon."

"What for?"

"Ever hear of ballistics?"

"Nope."

"Well, that's where they take a gun and fire it into a bale of cotton, and then they dig out the bullet and put it under a microscope, I guess it is, and look at the marks on it."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I heard of that."

"Seems as how every gun marks the bullets that go through its barrel a little different than every other gun."

"That so?"

"Yeah. Kinda like fingerprinting."

"Sure is."

"That's why I'd like to borrow the gun."

"I don't get it."

"Kinda like to see if the markings on the bullets fired from this

gun are anything like the ones on the bullet they're diggin' out of Abner's body."

"Abner's body?"

"Somebody shot him."

"The hell!"

"Over on the Mill Road. About an hour ago it must have been."

"The hell!" I said again.

The sheriff handed the rifle to Jim. Then he said to me, "Guess you'd better let me take the gun into the city, Clem."

"You got it," I said.

"Guess maybe I'd better take you into town first, though."

"I can walk."

"That ain't what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"The clink."

"You're arresting me?"

"That's right."

"For what?"

"Suspicion of murder."

"Why me?"

The sheriff spit in the dirt. "What the hell, Clem. Everybody knows you hated Ab's guts. Ever since the time you caught him out back of the barn with your girl. Everybody knows you threatened to put lead in him."

I didn't say anything. The sheriff put me in the back seat and got in beside me. We drove into town and he locked me up. Then he took the rifle and went away.

It was the next afternoon before I saw him again. He came in looking disappointed. He unlocked the cell and let me out.

"Here's your gun, Clem," he said. "You can go."

"I'm free?"

"Looks that way. I took the gun up to the city like I said. The marks on the slug ain't anything like the bullet that killed Abner. I don't understand it."

"Tough luck, Al."

"Only thing I can figger, it musta been one of them huntin' accidents."

"Guess so."

"Damn city hunters," he muttered. "Guess we'll never find out who."

"Guess not," I said.

I went out. I didn't tell him that I had stashed the other gun, the one I shot Abner with, in a hollow tree. Why should I tell him that? He didn't ask me.

I left the building.

The big man coming up the sidewalk was wearing a brand-new red hat and jacket. The boots were new. He had a new gun, and an old one.

"Hi," I stepped in front of him.

"Hi." He wanted to get past me, he was in a hurry.

"How's the huntin'?"

He shrugged. "Me and my pal shot at a fox, missed the damn thing."

"You both shot, and missed."

He nodded.

God damn city hunters, I thought, the sweat breaking out inside me.

"He run into the bottom of a

tree. The fox, not my pal—" he grinned, stupidly— "and by Jesus where he went to we don't know! We watched that hole in the tree and—"

"You dug around in there."

Silence.

"Oh yeah; this." He touched the one gun with his soft, manicured free hand. "I gotta get going." He nodded toward where his pal was waiting at the wheel of a big sedan. "We wanta get hunting again."

"I'll take it," I said. "Save you time."

"You the sheriff?"

"No, his deputy."

He handed me my gun. "Thanks," he said. "So-long."

"So-long."

It was a century before he got in the big car and they drove off. Then I started walking.

"Clem."

I wasn't surprised. Somehow I'd felt him there at the window all the time.

I turned, walked back slowly.

"One of them damn city hunters?"

"That's right, Al."

He held out his hand for the gun. "Woods are full of them."

"Sure are. Full of them."

Thoughtful Thieves

The owners of the Jeffersontown, Ky. Pharmacy would like to express their appreciation to the thieves who recently carried away their big safe. The safe was empty and hadn't been used for years. Moreover, the owners needed the floor space and had been wondering how ot get rid of the big hunk of iron.

Stolen Statue

Thieves in Derby, England, recently stole a 300-pound statue of Mercury from a park. In order to remove the image, the thieves drained the water away from a fountain pool in which it stood, leaving almost a hundred fish to die. In mythology, Mercury was the patron god of thieves.

One Little Letter

In Detroit, the police commission quickly canceled its order for "2,000 pounds of beer" for city prisoners. Officials said the order was a typographical error and should have read "beef" instead of "beer."

If his wife liked to undress without pulling down the shades, then by God that's how it was going to be! The Army .45 felt good in his hand, again...

The Red of Bougainvillea

BY
GROVE HUGHES

"I'M GOING TO BED," Marge said.

Will turned off the TV set and followed her down the hall to the bedroom.

She always started undressing as she went down the hall and when she turned on the light in the bedroom it was a sight. Marge had been a buyer in a department store when Will Compton had met her two years ago and she was one of those women who wear clothes well; but clothes hide a lot. When she was in a bathing suit, or shorts, or in their bedroom there was a big difference. She trailed her gown to the bed and sat down with an animal gracefulness before the vanity.

"The shade is up," Will said.

"Huh Huh," she mused, her hands busy with tissue and cold cream.

Marge had an unabashed awareness of her body. It was something she accepted as calmly as her thick blonde hair and full lips. From the start of their marriage there had been no modesty and Will liked it that way, but just so long as only he was concerned.

"Everybody and his brother can see in that window," he said.

"You say that every night. Anyway, no one is supposed to look into our room." She shook her head, stood up, stretched, rising on her toes and throwing her arms back.

Aphrodite, he mused. That feeling started low, and centered and spread. He felt the trembling of anticipation . . .

Her scream split the quiet of the room. She grabbed a filmy gown and turned her back to the window, her mobile features twisted with fright. Will came up fast off of the bed.

"What's the matter!"

Turning with her eyes to the window, she pointed. "A man," she gasped. "A man was looking in the window."

"Pull down the shade!" Will shouted as he raced down the darkened hall.

He had only one thing in mind now, to catch the man who had looked at his wife. The name Dingo was on his lips as he went through the screen door. Mells Dingo, the gaunt bachelor who lived on the corner and always looked at her when she went by him. Dingo with his big oval head and hot eyes, who'd been accused of shady deals in the used-car business and of beating up a waitress. The neighborhood hadn't liked Dingo from the first and Dingo knew it. It was rumored he was looking for another place.

Outside, Will sprinted towards the rear of the house to the bedroom window. He forgot about Marge's garden and the wheelbarrow until he plowed into the handles. He cursed as he fell on the wet grass.

His rage was loud. The porch light next door came on and Al Edgemont was outlined in the door.

"Who's that?" his neighbor called.

"It's me—Will." He limped into the light, his pajamas ripped and a trickle of blood coming from the cut on his chin.

"My God! What happened?"

"Window peeper. Got to catch him."

"You can't go around like that."

"The hell I can't," Will said. "You go down the block that way and I'll go up towards town."

"What's this guy look like?"

"I don't know," he said hurriedly. "But I'm checking Dingo first." He ran down the sidewalk, his fists doubled, the anger growing by the minute.

He didn't see anything. Dingo's house was dark. The anger turned from a panic to a deep-rooted hate.

He pounded on the door and kept pounding.

"Who is it?"

"Will Compton. Come on out of there! I'm going to break your filthy neck."

"You can go straight to. Who do you think you are?"

"Come on out of there or I'll come in and get you."

"Get off of my property or I'll call the police. You're crazy drunk."

"Dingo, you were looking in the window at my wife. I've seen you watching her and I'm fed up."

"You're crazy, Compton. Now get off of my place or I will call the cops."

"Keep away from my wife! You understand!"

"Beat it or I'll call the cops."

Will knew he couldn't prove anything so he turned reluctantly and walked down the steps, his bare feet tender and sore. He walked across the grass and the dew was soothing.

"I went down to the end of the block, but I didn't see anything," Al said, offering him a cigarette, his sweating skin shiny in the light of the match.

Will told him about Dingo and said, "Let's drive around. If it's not Dingo the guy is probably hiding until things quieten down. He couldn't have gone far."

"You'd better get some clothes on."

"Haven't got time! You're dressed. You drive. I'll tell Marge."

They drove in Al's 49 Merc, expanding their search from block to block, but they saw only two couples.

"He must have hid or kept in the yards and alleys," Al said. "I'm going to take you home before you get pneumonia."

"All right," Will agreed. "If I could just get my hands on him."

"Sure," Al said, clearing his throat and his chin tightened in the pale glow of the dash. "I know how you feel."

"Gimme another cigarette, Al."

He drew the smoke hungrily into his lungs. The Comptons and the Edgemonts were close neighbors. He and Al worked at the Central Electric Plant and they rode to work together.

"When is Lois coming back?"

"Next week, I guess. Everytime she gets ready her mother gets worse. I think the old lady is doing it so Lois will stay."

"Marge is lonesome for her."

"The girls are good friends. I like that in neighbors." He turned onto their street and asked, "You ought to report this to the cops."

"No."

"You really ought to, Will. They got plenty of suspects and when they get a report they go and check these guys and if one doesn't have an alibi its usually him."

"Maybe I should, but I'll handle it my own way. Maybe he'll come back and if he does I'll be waiting for him. Dingo's going to get it for this."

"Look, Will, take it easy. It might not have been Dingo. That's why we been riding around, right?"

"I know it was."

Marge let him in and he showered and changed to fresh pajamas. She put an adhesive bandage on his chin. He turned out the light and got in bed and she came to him. He sensed she was still upset, but she said, "Let's forget it, Will."

"Sure, baby." But even as he buried his face in the mass of sweet scented blonde hair and took her to him, some little part of the rage was still there.

He backed out of the garage the next morning and Al got in next to him, lunch pail in hand.

"How is Marge this morning?"

"All right."

"That's good. You know, something like that can prey on their minds. Sure glad to hear it didn't affect her."

"I'm going to be waiting for him."

"Oh, he probably won't come back."

"You can't tell, but I'm going to be there."

At dinner that night, Marge said, "Will, I saw him today."

"Dingo?"

"Yes. In the store. He wanted to know if you got over your drunk. Said you were real crazy last night, didn't make sense."

"I told him to stay away from you." Will threw the napkin aside and pushed back from the table.

That evening Marge went through the same routine, only Will stopped her in the hall. He reached up in the linen closet and got the automatic from the top shelf. The feel of the gun in his hand made him confident. He checked the clip. Marge gasped and said, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going outside and wait for him. You just go ahead and do just like you always do."

"Oh, no, Will. He won't be back. Its crazy. You promised!"

"You do like I said."

He went out the side door and tried to walk softly, taking pains not to bump into anything until he got to the shrubs and then he hunkered down like he had done overseas and he was very still, but the night was so quiet he could hear himself breathe. He wished he could make that soundless, too, but he couldn't so he tried to breathe slower and that helped.

Marge came into the bedroom and turned on the light and began undressing and he could see why a guy would come to this window and look.

A car honked on the next street and Will frowned in irritation. His fingers closed around the butt of the .45 and he remembered another quiet night in Korea when the Commies were trying to infiltrate the hill. He had waited and the man had appeared in the moonlight and there had been a savage thrill when the gun bucked in his

fingers and the man had flung his arms up into the cold night and fell backward. The only sound had been bushes being broken as the lifeless body rolled down the hill. The first time he had killed, and the feeling had given him a sense of power. He was ashamed of the feeling—of strength, of triumph—but it had been either him or the Commie, and he had won.

He bit down on his lip. To kill or be killed was one thing; but Dingo had only looked at his wife, had not wanted to kill him. It wasn't the same, but Will knew he wanted to kill the man. He tried to hope that the man would not come, but the other hope was stronger.

A screen door closed and he raised up on his heels and saw Al on the side porch. Al looked up at the moon, scratched his balding head meanwhile inhaling deep breaths of the clean night air. Then Al went back inside and it was quiet again, except for the whirl of traffic on the freeway.

Marge called from the bedroom. "Will, honey, come on in. I'm afraid with you out there."

Will waited awhile longer then went back into his house. He put the .45 back in the linen closet and turned off the light in the bedroom.

"Al could see you there in the window if his porch was closer and he wanted to look. That's what I mean about being more modest."

"You can't see through this gown, honey."

"With the light behind you it's pretty easy to see."

"Well, you told be to do just like I always do," she said. She was getting angry. "Now don't you go out there anymore. I like you here in the house. That's what I have a husband for."

He kissed her, but he was thinking about the Commie on the hill and he could see Dingo looking at her with his intense black eyes and how his body would jerk and flap like a sawdust doll when the slugs tore into it. The way it would sprawl under the bougainvillea, the blood a brighter red than the blossoms.

Al drove the next day and Will was moody as they went uptown to the plant. "Look," Al said. "Why don't you give this up?"

"I'm going to get him."

"Yeah, but you're giving me nervous prostration. I'm even afraid to come out and get some air. Were you out there last night?"

"Sure."

"I thought so. Look, if it's Dingo he's not coming back."

"How do you know?"

"Will, you know those guys never do once they are found out. They are usually some guy who gets an urge and he looks in a window and that's it. Once they think they are found out they don't do it again."

"Dingo will be back and I'll get him."

"Well, let me know when you stop waiting for him. I'd like to feel I can come out at night without having you take a pot-shot at me."

"Don't worry, I said!" snapped Will. "I'm only going to shoot Dingo when he walks up to the window. I want to catch him in the act."

"You shouldn't talk like that, Will. I'm your friend and you know that, but if you shoot the guy they'll question everybody and I'll have to tell the police you planned it. That makes it murder because you haven't even asked the police for help. Don't do anything crazy."

"I hadn't thought of that," Will said and he knew that Al might be right; but it didn't stop that wild thrill he got everytime he thought of Dingo coming to the window and the way his finger would squeeze.

That night he took the gun out of the closet and Marge's eyes pleaded with him. He tried to smile to reassure her, but she saw through it and her lip quivered.

"Don't, Will. Please give it up. Call the police and tell them about it. Let them handle it."

"Now don't you worry, Marge."

"Will!"

"Yes, honey?"

"Will . . . you want to kill Dingo, don't you?"

"Don't talk nonsense," he said, and went out into the cool night air. He knew she was right. He didn't want to admit it, but it was true. But it wasn't just Dingo anymore. It was anyone. He had the urge to kill.

The breeze had picked up and the branches of the bushes rubbed against each other and he had to listen very hard. An hour passed and he relived that incident on the hill and his palms sweated. He changed the gun from hand to hand and wiped the sweat on his trousers, but still they were moist. His mouth was dry and he wanted a cigarette, but he doggedly stayed in the shadows.

A shrub by the window moved. He froze. The shrub moved again. Will slid down on his stomach and the patrol tactics came back and he was silent as he slithered across the damp lawn. A few feet from the bush he rose to a half-crouch and slammed a shell into the chamber. A shadow came out of the bush and it yelped. He nearly squeezed the trigger.

While the frightened dog disappeared around the house, he tried to calm the shaking of his fingers. It was minutes before he was able to extract the shell and clear the breech. The light went off in the bedroom. Marge's voice came from the window and it quivered.

"Will."

"Yes, honey."

"Please come in."

"I am. I told you not to say anything, Marge. Now if he's around

he's heard."

"Come on in, Will."

He put the gun back in the closet and undressed in the moonlight. She watched him from the bed and when he was beside her she came closer. She was shaking.

"I didn't see anyone out the window, Will. I just said that to see if you loved me."

He turned to look at her face in the moonlight.

"Don't lie to me, Marge. You saw a man at the window. What are you trying to do?"

"I just don't want you to go out there anymore. Promise me you won't. I'll pull down the shades."

"He's got to be stopped. This is our property and no jerk has a right to come on it. Let alone look at my wife. If I don't get him I'll always wonder if he's looking in the window. I won't be free, comfortable. Neither will you. It's like living in fear."

"I would rather live like that."

"You did see a man, didn't you?"

"Darling, please don't go out there again. I could have been mistaken."

"Can't you remember anything about his face. It *was* Dingo, wasn't it?"

"He was in the shadows . . . if there was a man. I'm not sure any longer."

"The dirty louse," Will said heavily.

"Honey, don't go out there tomorrow night. Promise me."

He didn't want to argue anymore. He was afraid for himself. The house was nice. Their neighbors were fine people, except Dingo. They would live here for years and if he shot Dingo, it would never be the same.

Al wasn't quite ready the next morning and Will had to wait. When Al came out, he was still buttoning his shirt.

"Trying to get some housework done," Al gasped. "Lois called last night. She'll be in early tomorrow morning."

"Say, that's swell. Anything Marge can do to help you just call on her."

"Sure, I know. Thanks . . . Say, I heard you outside last night."

"It was a dog."

"Why don't you give it up? The guy won't be back."

"But what if he does? You want him looking in at Lois?"

"Of course not, but you're playing it too big, Will."

"The guy has to be stopped."

"Yeah, but look what it's done. I'm afraid to come out of my house. And you. What do you do anymore, but sit out there in the bushes. Don't even watch TV anymore. You missed a good fight last night."

Will nodded. He and Al were fight devotees. Sometimes when they had favorites they made small bets and the fight was always good for conversation when they went to work. "Who's fighting tonight

at the Legion?"

"Two Mexican boys. Both of them are comers. You gonna watch it?"

"I think I will," Will said and it seemed to lift a load off of his mind. "Yeah, I think I will."

He had an excuse not to be out there tonight. It would make Marge and Al happy and it would make him feel better. But he still had the urge and whenever he thought of the gun he thought of killing and now it didn't really matter if the man was Dingo or not. Just so he came up and stood by the window. Will knew he would kill the man and he didn't want to and he was afraid.

At lunch he left the plant and went over to the used-car lot where Dingo worked as a salesman. Dingo was talking to a customer. He waited for a few minutes and the customer tried to leave, but Dingo saw Will and kept pulling the customer back and finally Will went over to where they were looking at a blue Chevvy.

"Dingo."

"Look, I got nothing to say to you. I'm busy."

"I got plenty to say to you."

"Beat it or I'll call the cops."

The customer had been watching with a wary look in his eyes and he stepped closer and said, "I'm a retired city detective. What's the trouble."

Will felt cold, but he was still angry. "This is personal between us."

"This guy is crazy."

"Why don't we go down to the station and get to the bottom of it?" the customer said.

"Forget it," Will said. "It isn't important."

"Leave me alone from now on," Dingo said.

He told Marge when he came home that he wasn't going outside tonight and she cried and held him tight. They sat in front of TV and he knew he shouldn't have been sitting out in the darkness those nights. She stayed with him until the fights came on and then went down the hall. The phone rang and it was Al.

"I'll take this guy Moneno for a buck," Al said.

On the TV screen, they were getting their instructions and Will looked at the other fighter, who was called Angeles, and he looked like he was older and shorter, but still good. "You got a bet. Come on over watch the fight with me."

"Thanks, pal, but I'm in my shorts. I'll take that buck in the morning."

"Make it two bucks."

"You're on."

Will hung up. Marge was going down the hall, he heard the light switch click. His legs moved and he didn't know how to stop; they carried him to the hall and he got the .45 and didn't say anything to Marge. That insistent hunter urge was on him again. He tried to

look at the TV, but it couldn't hold him. He went out the side door and into a crouch, worked around to the bushes. The deep rumble of traffic on the freeway was artillery and the bushes were the hill.

Marge was in the bedroom and she hadn't pulled the shade. She was getting ready for him to come to bed after the fight and she was making long preparations. He sucked in his breath and wanted to throw the gun away. He remembered the detective. But it would be on his property so it was defense of his property, wasn't it? The gun felt right in his hand and he pulled the slide back and the cartridge went into place and then he held his breath and waited. It wasn't long.

The shadow darted from the side of the house and crouched by the corner of the house. Will raised the forty-five and put tension on the trigger. Must wait. Be sure. The figure slowly moved upward, just out of the slant of light from the window. Marge was getting into her gown and the shadow froze. Will moved quickly across the yard, oblivious of the sound, only wanting to get closer, to be sure that he didn't miss. The shadow heard him and turned and cried with a high whimper of despair and flailed back into the light. Terror marked the face.

Will heard the growl forming in his teeth, let it come out, and raised the gun, big and blue-black in the light.

"No! God, no!" the face screamed.

Will began the trigger pull. Easy and constant. But he never ended it. He held it and looked at the face and he thought of Marge, thinking that this was their home and if he killed this man it could never be the same home again.

He threw the gun aside and moved in, his fists working as pistons, his body a powerful crankshaft that revved up faster. He felt the bones go in his hands, but the pain didn't stop him. He was still hitting when he heard the sirens.

The cop pulled him away and his hands throbbed at his sides. It was over and it had been the right way. He had beaten the urge to kill; he had beaten it and now he could live again.

"What'd he do?" the cop asked.

"Window peeper. I was waiting for him."

The cop picked up the .45. "Your gun?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you shoot him?" the cop asked. "It would have been easier on him. He'll never look the same after this beating."

"This is the way I wanted it," Will said looking at the unrecognizable face. "He'll remember better."

Al Edgemont groaned, his face the color of the bougainvillea blossoms.

The Pigeon

BY CLAUDIUS RAYE

He shouldn't have insisted on drinking that beer. The milk would have been much healthier.

He came down our street—Sixth Street.

John pushed me on the shoulder with the butt of his rod. "Look at that!"

So I looked and this guy was strolling as if he owned the street. He'd had it but didn't know yet.

"He's a tourist. Must be!" Petey said.

"Or a luney," chirped Herb. We were in the shadows and he was leaning against a dirty lamp post scanning the street for sign of the "Rabbits."

I said. "Luneys don't wear tailor-made suits. And this isn't the tourist season."

"Could be a dick searching for John," said Herb.

"At night!" mocked John, waving his gun like a flag. "Those stupid cops wouldn't dare send just one man down here. Not at night."

He'd taken the gun from a rookie beat-cop the night before and had given the fool a roughing for his mistake. It was a serious error for cops to walk alone in this section.

I'd given permission to kill the bastards if possible, but John is a sadistic sort. He'd rather chop them to hell with a lead pipe and let them live to suffer.

"He glanced this way," Herb muttered. "You think he's a stake-out for the Rabbits?"

"Those hop-heads never saw a gook like that in their life," I said.

"Anyway, I don't think he's the President. From here, his hands don't look like golf hands," John cracked.

The slick paused across the street and gazed into a hock-shop display window. The shop was closed and only the night-light blazed feebly from inside, silhouetting the slick's face. He was sharp, sort of tall, with sloped shoulders like those you see on a man of action. His hands hung loose and free at his sides.

"I don't dig him," mumbled John, "but I'd sure like to. How about it, Bill? Shall I take him?" He was fondling the gun in his hands.

"No. The shots might scare the Rabbits off."

"Nah! I mean, take him with the barrel—easy like. I won't make any noise."

"You couldn't take him with a ten-foot pipe. I don't think he's a slick. This will take all of us."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't been admiring those secondhand watches that Pop's fencing for us. He's watching our reflection on that glass window."

They saw it and agreed.

I gave some instructions. "Petey, you go down street and come in from his left; John, you take him from the right. Herb and I will come in from here. Make sure he doesn't break and run past you."

"What about the Rabbits?"

"They'll keep."

Petey moved out, strolling casually, right hand crammed deep into the pocket of his light denim jacket. His air-jock half-boots clunked dully on the smooth surface of the sidewalk. With his left hand, he began to unfasten the wide leather belt from his blue jeans. That heavy brass buckle was his favorite instrument—even over his straight razor—because he'd honed one edge until it was sharp enough to split hairs. Holding the end of the belt, he'd slash down and gash the face of his victim. He was deadly.

John tucked the gun into his jacket pocket, keeping his hand around it like it was an unweened baby. He was proud of that gun. Wanted to use it bad.

The guy finished his gazing and turned and started walking slowly down the street. He was parallel with Petey. John turned and came back. "He's wise."

"Probably," I answered. We followed in behind.

Our victim wasn't in a hurry. He seemed to be rather sure of himself. I gave Petey the signal to move ahead but since the guy was still

across the street, he had a clear escape if he could outrun Petey. But he never seemed to realize that we were on him. He appeared as calm as a hot summer day.

We tagged with him past the corner, down beyond Parkie's Grocery, on past the empty warehouse, toward Max's bar.

"He's going inside Max's," John whispered. "This is made to order. We never had it so good."

Max Schulman was Petey's old man. He didn't care what we did in his place as long as we kept it neat and quiet. He didn't want attention from the cops. Whereas they couldn't do much with us juveniles, they could put the hook to him good, so he tried to keep his nose clean. His hands were messy though in some bigger deals, or so Petey had told us.

Petey waited and we entered together, right behind "Mr. Pigeon." John couldn't keep a smirk off his face.

I could feel tension rippling in that smoke-filled bar like it was electricity. A couple of punks were in a corner booth and they had bristled at the sight of Pigeon like a couple of tom-cats who've had their fur ruffled the wrong way. But when they saw us, they cooled off and went back to sipping their beers.

Pigeon was sitting calmly in a booth. Max was waiting on him. We went over.

"What's he ordering?" I asked.

Max turned, smiling because he liked us and considered us all as "chips-off-the-old-cell-block." He wiped his large bartender-stained hands on his smudged apron. "Says beer."

"Bring him milk."

Max moved off. John slipped in across the table from Pigeon. I pulled a chair over and sat straddled across it, propping my elbows on the back of the chair.

"Might as well enjoy ourselves," John said. "Petey, get some beers for us."

"You'd better change that milk of mine back to beer," Pigeon said softly and sort of dangerously.

"Why?" taunted John. He still had his gun in his pocket but he was shaking with fever to bring it out. He looked at me and decided he'd better hold off a while.

"Milk upsets my stomach. You don't want my stomach to get upset because that would make me feel bad and I might get up and walk out."

"As long as you got to go, I'd rather see you go in pain," John replied, speaking about a different type of going. Pigeon was as cool and collected as last month's gas bill during January.

"I don't go, tough guy," said Pigeon. "I'm here to do you guys a big favor."

"Ahhh, let me take him now, Bill. Huh?"

"Let him talk," I said. "I like favors."

"Especially the kind with sugar coating," mocked John. "You got any gum drops on you?"

"No."

"See there! He insults me! Now let me take him."

"Play ball with me," said Pigeon, "and I'll see that you get all the gum drops you want."

"Nah. I hate gum drops," John said.

"Lay off," I said. Then I asked Pigeon, "Where you from?"

Both of his hands were on the table. He made a steeple with his fingers. "I'm from New York."

"What for you here?" asked Herb. He'd moved over slightly to the side and behind Pigeon.

"Dabs Johnston sent me personally down here to organize. And I'm going to organize. Get used to the idea."

"Haven't we got anything to say about it?" asked John. He was propping his elbows on the table surface and his chin rested in the cup of his hands. A cigarette dangled out of his mouth like he'd seen done in a recent movie. It was more realistic though than his performance.

Petey brought back four cold beers with the sweat running down their sides and a glass of milk. He set the tray on the table. Pigeon reached and his hands closed about one of the bottles.

I grabbed his wrist. "Didn't you hear me? I said that you'd drink milk."

He was strong. He shook my hand off. He wasn't so calm now. His eyes weren't smiling and his mouth was crinkling at the edges like a dried out floor mop.

"Punk, you don't tell me nothing. Hear?" Pigeon's voice was sharp. "Anymore wise stuff from you four kids and I'll take a rod to you all. To everyone of you."

"I think he means it," said John. His hand was still wrapped about his gun in his jacket pocket. Pigeon never expected guys as young as us to have a gun.

"So, I should cry?" I replied. "What kind of organizing were you going to do on us?"

Pigeon relaxed, went back to building steeples with his fingers. "It'll be big with big money. Rumble came through to Dabs that you juveniles were acting up down here in this Texas city—so he sent me. We'll train you into a money-making machine."

"I don't want to be a machine," said John.

"What training did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Simple," Pigeon replied. "Those jackets you're wearing, they hamper arm movements. Those jockboots prevent you from running at full speed . . ."

"I ain't going to do any running," Herb interrupted.

"As an efficient gang, you might have to flee the scene of the crime and . . ."

"Yeah, what about that?" inter-

jected John. "You going to plan our raids, too?"

"Certainly. As a common citizen, I can travel about the city and never be suspected," said Pigeon.

"You common?" asked Petey.

"*Punks!* I've been in this racket for ten years. I know what I'm talking about. I organized a suburb of Chicago. Several of our best men on Dabs' New York gang were trainees. You might have the same chance."

"Gee!" mocked John, "a mere punk like me getting to be a bigshot and all!"

"I don't know as if I like being called a punk," said Petey.

"Sure you do," said Herb. "Otherwise you'd stay home and study school lessons for class tomorrow."

"Punk sounds nasty," persisted Petey.

"Yes, but you won't be punks long—not with my training," said Pigeon. "Soon you'll be making big money."

"We make good money now."

"You'll make more," Pigeon stated. He grasped a bottle of beer and turned it up, drinking about half of it. I motioned to Petey and he moved. When Pigeon noticed the straight razor edging against his throat, he quit drinking the beer but he couldn't move his head down.

"What's this?" he gasped, his voice strained.

"Shouldn't have drank that beer, Pigeon," I said. "I told you to drink milk. Healthier."

"But the big money!"

"Hell, all of our families have money except for Petey here. We give our earnings to Petey and he almost has enough to go to college next year when he graduates from high school, isn't that right Petey?"

"Sure, Bill. Sure."

"See?" I said. "This is just for fun. Strictly pleasure."

"I got money. I'll pay you! I CAN GET MORE!"

"Rather have the fun."

"Let me take him," begged John. He dragged the gun from his jacket pocket, caressing it like a blessed thing.

"Too late," said Petey, wiping blood from his razor. "My hand slipped."

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